

ANGELWINGS
CONTEMPORARY
QUEER FICTION
FROM TAIWAN



TRANSLATED BY
FRAN MARTIN

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This book is dedicated to all the dear friends I met in Taiwan in 1995 and 1997–1998—you know who you are!—and to the memory of Qiu Miaojin.

INTRODUCTION
TAIWAN'S LITERATURE
OF TRANSGRESSIVE
SEXUALITY



FRAN MARTIN

On the first damp, gray day of 1999, an unsuspecting passerby en route to the vegetable market in Taipei's Gongguan neighborhood, near National Taiwan University, might have been startled to stumble on a street-side drag show in full swing, aswirl with all the fabulous frocks and stellar talents of some of the city's better-known drag artists. The inquiring pedestrian might then have peered through the window of the adjacent bookstore to see stacks of Chinese paperbacks and lifestyle magazines crammed into a tiny retail area, jostling for space with rainbow flags, buttons, and posters. It was the opening party for Gin Gin's, Taiwan's first dedicated gay and lesbian bookstore.

Gin Gin's opening in the final year of the 1990s stands as a fitting culmination of a remarkable decade in which lesbian, gay, and queer sexualities became a major focus of public attention and anxiety in Taiwan's public sphere.¹ It would not be an exaggeration to say that

the 1990s marked a radical shift in the way sexuality was thought and spoken about in Taiwan, suggesting the stirrings of a new, public sexual culture unprecedented not only in Taiwan but in any of the Chinese societies of the Asia-Pacific region. The decade witnessed an extraordinary efflorescence of sexual subcultures and of discussion—both hostile and amicable—about homosexuality in public fora such as newspapers, television, radio, and Internet chat rooms, as well as at universities and academic conferences. Over this ten-year period, lesbian and gay social groups emerged in the major cities of Taipei, Taichung, and Kaohsiung and on university campuses island wide; lesbian and gay political activists lobbied the government on issues including HIV/AIDS, sexuality and urban space, and discrimination on the basis of sexual preference; heated opinions on homosexual marriage and gay rights flew back and forth in the local papers and on talk-back radio; and vibrant commercial lesbian and gay cultures emerged around bars, dance clubs, and glossy lifestyle publications. The Mandarin neologisms *tongzhi* (often used in ways comparable to “lesbian and gay”) and *ku’er* (a common rendition of “queer”) came into widespread circulation, and *tongzhi* art exhibitions and film festivals began to appear regularly. At the same time—and as an integral part of the new *tongzhi* culture—the decade saw the rise to prominence of the literary movement of *tongzhi* literature (*tongzhi wenxue*) and its subgenre *ku’er* literature (*ku’er wenxue*).

This collection presents ten key texts of 1990s *tongzhi wenxue* for the first time in English translation.² Like the commentaries that accompany the translations, this Introduction attempts to position *tongzhi wenxue* in relation to its role within the broader transformation in public discourse on sexualities in 1990s Taiwan.

The island of Taiwan, lying off the east coast of southern China, has undergone several successive waves of colonization, and its colonial history has profoundly shaped the contemporary culture that is the background to the stories collected here. Populated by a majority of Han Chinese, who settled on the island from the thirteenth century, joining the island’s Indigenous inhabitants, Taiwan was ceded to

Japan in 1895 as part of the settlement at the end of the Sino-Japanese War.³ The Japanese administration enforced the use of the Japanese language, the teaching of Japanese culture and history, and Japanese law upon the colonized population, and Taiwanese culture today retains notable vestiges of its Japanese colonial history. In this volume, Wu Jiwen's story, "Rose Is the Past Tense of Rise," tells of a family profoundly influenced by its elder members, who grew up under the Japanese administration: Each member of this family, for example, is called by a Japanese rather than a Chinese given name.

Taiwan was handed over to Nationalist China in 1945 after Japan's defeat at the end of the Second World War. Four years later the Kuomintang (KMT, or Nationalist) party fled with the KMT army and its allies to the island after defeat by the Communist forces in the Chinese Civil War. The KMT governed the Republic of China on Taiwan until 2000. Following its move to Taiwan in 1949, the KMT enforced the use of Mandarin in place of both the local Minnan language (a dialect of Hokkien) and Japanese, taught mainland Chinese culture and history in schools, and enforced their own legal code.⁴ The KMT-appointed presidents during this period, Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo, maintained a harshly authoritarian rule based on the principle of anti-Communism and the idea that the KMT would one day wrest mainland China from the grasp of the Chinese Communist Party. Any form of political or cultural dissent was forcibly repressed, and the society was held under martial law for thirty-eight years, from 1949 until 1987.

In the late 1980s a series of far-reaching social, economic, and political changes began to occur in Taiwan's culture. Politically the 1980s witnessed massive changes associated with the weakening of KMT hegemony: Martial law was lifted in 1987, and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), legalized in 1986, began actively to pursue a program of nativist mobilization against rule by the authoritarian, mainlander-dominated KMT. The political and bureaucratic regulation of culture waned as the KMT lifted its ban on the founding of new newspapers and ceased censorship of literary and political texts.⁵ While the island's economy boomed, social change was

impelled by continuing islandwide urbanization, the rise of electronic media and information technology in everyday life, an explosion of new literary and cultural journals and magazines, the continuing growth of urban middle-class markets for literature, and the solidification of an unevenly postindustrial, late capitalist form of commodity culture.⁶ These transformations continued and deepened into the 1990s, particularly with the diversification and strengthening of a range of grassroots political movements including feminism, the Indigenous people's movement, the trade union movement, the environmental movement, and the *tongzhi* movement. The 1990s also saw Taiwan's first direct presidential elections. In a historic victory at the 2000 election, Chen Shui-bian of the DPP became the Republic's first-ever non-KMT president.

In contrast to the clearly identifiable literary schools of modernism and nativism in the 1960s and 1970s, Taiwan's literary scene in the late 1980s and 1990s has been characterized by its fragmentation into a multiplicity of disjunctive styles. Perhaps appropriately, this period coincided with the spread of the discourse of postmodernism (*houxiandaiyiyi*), which gained impetus from Fredric Jameson's greatly influential 1987 tour of the island.⁷ Lin Yaode characterizes the new fiction of this period, which tends to reject the humanism and historicism of the modernist and nativist movements, as "a deconstructive tide arising from the collapse of older value systems."⁸ Chu T'ien-wen's prizewinning 1994 novel, *Notes of a Desolate Man* (*Huangren shouji*), adumbrated in Chu's earlier short story "Bodhisattva Incarnate" (translated in this volume) is an emblematic instance of the 1990s mainstreaming of a postmodernist literary aesthetic that privileges narrative fragmentation, linguistic play, a contemporary urban setting, and a global imaginary. As well as such overtly postmodernist writing, fiction in this period encompasses an unprecedented variety of other styles and genres, from realism, surrealism, metafiction, psychological literature (*xinli wenxue*), urban literature, the nostalgic "literature of the veterans' neighborhood" (*juanqu wenxue*), Indigenous literature, and feminist writing, to popular forms such as fantasy, mystery, martial arts fiction, and science fiction.⁹ As literary critic Chou Ying-hsiung points out in his intro-

duction to a recent collection of essays on contemporary Taiwan fiction, this plurality of literary styles and forms bespeaks a multiple, fractured experience of contemporary Taiwan society. Chou argues that this plurality raises philosophical and political questions about cultural authority by forcing readers to consider from whose point of view “reality” appears as such. He asks: “Is literature’s object ultimately the reality of the Chinese mainland, or Taiwan? The city or the countryside? Han Chinese, or Indigenous Taiwanese? Patriarchal or feminist? Heterosexual or homosexual? The culture of Hokkien workers or that of the veterans’ neighborhood?”¹⁰ This moment of plural, disjunctive culture and literature provides the context for the stories of 1990s *tongzhi wenxue* translated here.

If one had to single out of this cacophony of literary voices one especially noteworthy development in the literary culture of 1990s Taiwan, one might justifiably cite the remarkable rise of the literature of transgressive sexuality. The new *tongzhi* fiction is as notable for its success in earning prestigious prizes from the literary establishment as it is for its sudden appearance and proliferation since the early years of the decade. In fact it seemed at times that not a literary competition went by without at least one prize being awarded to a *tongzhi*-themed short story, novella, or novel. Among the authors represented in this collection, major literary prizes have been won for lesbian-, gay-, or queer-themed work by Chu T’ien-wen (the 1994 *China Times* Novel Prize for *Notes of a Desolate Man*); Qiu Miaojin (the 1995 *China Times* Honorary Novel Prize for *The Crocodile’s Journal*); and Chi Tawei (the 1995 *United Daily News* Novella Prize for *The Membranes*).¹¹ Other literary prizes for *tongzhi* fiction were also won in that decade by Cao Lijuan (first prize in the 1991 *United Daily News* short-story competition for the lesbian-themed story “The Maidens’ Dance,” and the 1996 *Unitas* Honorary Novella Prize for *Regarding Her White Hair and Other Matters*); Ling Yan (the 1991 *Independence Daily* Novel Prize for her lesbian-themed novel *The Silent Thrush*); Du Xiulan (the 1996 Crown Popular Fiction Prize for her lesbian-themed *Rebel Woman*); and Dong Qizhang (the 1995 *United*

Daily News Special Novel Prize for his transgender-themed *Double-self*). In an interesting development in the closing years of this decade of queer literary brilliance, the gay and lesbian glossy magazine *Ge3L* established the Inaugural Global Chinese *Tongzhi* Literature Prize in 1998, a competition dedicated to rewarding excellence in new lesbian and gay literary production. Three of the authors represented in this collection — Chen Xue, Wu Jiwen, and Hsu Yoshen — served as judges in the new competition.¹² The continuing vigor of *tongzhi wenxue* at the end of the decade suggests that the 1990s may turn out to be only the beginning for Taiwan's literature of dissident sexuality.

Highlighting the historical and social factors that led to *tongzhi wenxue*'s emergence in the 1990s as a clearly defined field of literary production should not be taken to mean that before that decade, writers from Taiwan never wrote about intragender eroticism. Indeed, modern fiction in Chinese in general, including modern literature from Taiwan, has quite often touched upon sexual relations between people of the same gender.¹³ For Taiwan's male *tongzhi* readerships, the 1970s and early 1980s fiction of Pai Hsien-yung in particular has played a key role in inaugurating the field of *tongzhi wenxue* (especially Pai's story collection *Lonely Seventeen* [1976]; his story "A Sky Full of Bright, Twinkling Stars" [1983], translated by the author in 1994; and his novel *Crystal Boys* [1983], translated by Howard Goldblatt).¹⁴ However, for the purposes of this collection, I have focused on the more or less discrete and coherent movements known as *tongzhi wenxue* and *ku'er wenxue*, which fully emerge as such only in the 1990s.

The principle that unites the stories gathered here is their reception and interpretation as *tongzhi* or *ku'er wenxue* by a self-consciously *tongzhi* community of readers. To adapt Benedict Anderson's notion, this is a kind of "imagined community" of queer readers that developed a strong understanding of itself as such during the 1990s.¹⁵ The coalescence of this community of readers is illustrated in the several anthologies of *tongzhi* and *ku'er wenxue* that appeared during the decade, edited by prominent local *tongzhi* intellectuals like Chi Tawei, Yang Zongrun, and An Keqiang, and including writing by

many of the authors translated in this volume (Chu T'ien-wen, Lin Yuyi, Lin Chun Ying, Hong Ling, Chen Xue, and Chi Tawei).¹⁶ Popular discussion of the new *tongzhi wenxue* by its readership is evidenced in the proliferation of Internet sites with dedicated bulletin boards for this purpose (for example, the art and literature discussion space linked from the lesbian group Women zhi Jian's homepage, or the Tongzhi Wenxueyuan discussion board for male *tongzhi* writing).¹⁷ In addition to facilitating the discussion of published works, *tongzhi* Web sites also provide space for the Internet publication of fiction by aspiring *tongzhi* writers and offer reading lists of published *tongzhi wenxue* like the one linked from the Tongnü zhi Wu site (itself named after Cao Lijuan's 1991 lesbian short story "The Maiden's Dance"), which lists fiction by Taiwanese authors including Qiu Miaojin, Cao Lijuan, Chu T'ien-hsin, Chu T'ien-wen, Wu Jiwen, Lin Yuyi, Lin Chun Ying, Hong Ling, Chi Tawei, Hsu Yoshen, Chen Xue, Dong Qizhang, Ping Lu, Lai Hsiang-yin, Li Ang, and others.¹⁸ Also at a popular level, Taiwan's two 1990s lesbian and gay glossy magazines, *Ge3L* and *Together*, ran regular sections on *tongzhi* fiction, reviewing both local fiction and fiction in Chinese translation, as well as publishing short stories by local *tongzhi* popular writers. Undoubtedly, the consolidation of a self-conscious *tongzhi* reading public during the 1990s was also contributed to by the publication of a series of special queer-themed issues of scholarly journals, including *Chung-wai Literary Monthly*, *Unitas*, *Eslite Book Review*, and *Isle Margin*. These special issues were contributed to and edited by local scholars specializing in the analysis of the emergent *tongzhi wenxue*, and were consumed enthusiastically by a younger generation of *tongzhi* intellectuals.¹⁹

Illustrating how this new mode of cultural production and classification facilitates forms of *tongzhi* self-identification at the level of everyday life, I'm reminded of a conversation I had with a friend from the *nütongzhi* movement during my year in Taipei in 1995. On a visit to my apartment, after perusing my shelves of Taiwan fiction, my friend Li-Li remarked with satisfaction, "Hey! You've got practically all the same books my girlfriend and I have at our place!" Li-Li's remark could be interpreted as in a sense a performative state-

ment, discursively producing a collectivity that bound us together through our shared practices of *tongzhi* reading.

Following this principle of the *tongzhi* readership as imagined community, then, the tradition of *tongzhi wenxue* comes into being at the moment of its reception, interpretation, and appropriation by its readers, rather than necessarily in the moment of its production. With the exception of the younger *ku'er* writers included here (Chi Tawei, Chen Xue, Hong Ling, and Qiu Miaojin), it is not necessarily the case that all the authors represented in this volume have thought of themselves as contributing to the project of creating *tongzhi wenxue*. Rather, their work becomes meaningful as *tongzhi wenxue* through its appropriation, classification, and indeed politicization as such by its reading public.

This point also relates to the choice of title for this volume. *Angelwings* is a reference to the story by Chen Xue included here, "Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel," in which Cao-Cao, the lesbian author protagonist, searches for the magically enabling "wings" that will enable her to escape her entrapment as an earthbound, flightless angel. For Cao-Cao, these wings are a combination of the resolution of her love for her lover/mother, and the realization of the power of her own writing in representing and producing her sexual subjectivity.²⁰ One of the implications of *Angelwings* as a title for this collection is that *tongzhi wenxue* has the capacity to act in this enabling way not only for *tongzhi* authors, but also for the *tongzhi* readerships that this fiction precipitates. In this way the fiction collected here does not simply represent emergent forms of sexual subjectivity, but also enables and produces them.

It would be impossible in a volume of this length to include every work classifiable as *tongzhi* or *ku'er wenxue*, expansive as this field has become. Inclusions here are limited first by the date of their publication: Ten stories have been chosen that appeared between 1989 and 1998, roughly demarcating the decade of the 1990s. This is partly in order to describe the outline of the *tongzhi* and *ku'er wenxue* movements that took recognizable shape only with the publication and reception of this material in the 1990s. Partly, too, the decision to

omit earlier gay- or lesbian-themed fiction (most obviously that of Pai Hsien-yung) is due to my desire to present the work of authors whose writing has not been extensively translated into English before now. Another factor restricting what appears in this volume is length: Since this is a collection of short fiction, I have not been able to include work by writers who have to date only published novels, such as the young author of popular lesbian fiction, Du Xiulan.²¹ Inclusions are limited to one story per author, and individual stories have been chosen either for their exemplification of an author's style, or for their special popularity with *tongzhi* readerships. Even given these restrictions, it has been impossible to provide a comprehensive translation of all the major pieces of short 1990s *tongzhi* fiction; one regrettable omission is Cao Lijuan's now classic 1991 story about the relationships among girls in an all-girls' school, "The Maidens' Dance" (*Tongnü zhi wu*). Nevertheless, while it makes no claim to be an exhaustive catalogue of *tongzhi wenxue*, the collection does, I hope, delineate the major contours of this important literary movement.

The term *tongzhi* arrived in Taiwan from Hong Kong in 1992 as part of the Chinese translation for the "New Queer Cinema" section in Taipei's annual Golden Horse Film Festival.²² Prior to this there had existed no generic term that at once politicizes sexual identification and notionally also includes both men and women. Since then *tongzhi* has commonly replaced the older *tongxinglian*, which, meaning "same-sex love," is a literal and comparably pathologizing translation of the sexological term "homosexuality."²³ *Tongzhi* is the standard term for "comrade" in the rhetoric of both the Chinese Communist Party and the KMT and is appropriated to mean something like "lesbian/gay," partly because its first character is also the first of *tongxinglian*. *Tongzhi* can also be read, perhaps, as a cheeky citation of the "National Father" (*Guofu*) of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen, whose celebrated deathbed pronouncement, "The revolution has not yet succeeded; the comrades must struggle yet," has also been appropriated for *tongzhi* political struggles.²⁴ The "queer"

of “queer theory” and “queer literature,” in contrast, has appeared most commonly in academic and literary discourse since the mid-1990s as the phonetic transliteration *ku’er*.²⁵

Although notionally the term *tongzhi* applies to both women and men, the different genders of course occupy different social positions, particularly in relation to the hegemonic system of compulsory marriage and reproduction, and hence face different pressures in the expression of transgressive sexualities. This collection contains work by five men authors and five women authors, including four lesbian-themed stories by women, one gay-themed story by a woman, four gay-themed stories by men, and one transgender-themed story by a man. The stories themselves illustrate the complexities of men’s and women’s differential positionings vis-à-vis sexual practice and sexual choice. Arguably, men are subject to the particular pressure of bearing the responsibility of continuing the family name—as we see, for example, in Hsu Yoshen’s story, in which the mainland Chinese character’s elder brother begs forgiveness of the ancestors upon discovering his younger brother kissing another man. Women, though, face overall subordination within what remains, despite the untiring efforts of Taiwan’s feminist movements, an intensely patriarchal culture.²⁶ This is demonstrated, for example, by the conceptual linkage of the category “women” with the activity of reproduction and the related myth of women’s essential sexual passivity, explored in Chu T’ien-hsin’s story, and so roundly critiqued by the work of the three lesbian authors, Qiu Miaojin, Chen Xue, and Hong Ling.

The 1990s were marked by the unprecedented confluence of a number of social and historical factors that, combined, produced the conditions for the emergence of the new public cultures of sexuality, of which the fiction gathered here forms a part. As already noted, with the political liberalizations in the final years of the 1980s came an explosion in oppositional political movements. Among these, certain branches of feminism offered the space for the development of a thoroughgoing public critique of existing gender and sexual relations. Feminist social spaces provided much of the basis for the

emergence of new forms of lesbian feminist identity and lesbian community, as demonstrated by the fact that since its establishment, Taipei's Fembooks has been one of the city's main stockists of *tongzhi* fiction and theory. With the passing of time, the alliances between *tongzhi* groups and feminist groups have grown more complex, and in some cases *tongzhi* groups have split with the feminists in order to mark out the autonomy of their sexual politics. Nevertheless, in the earlier stages of the *tongzhi* movement's development, the feminist movement undeniably provided valuable and enabling support and resources.²⁷

The vigorous *tongzhi* political movement that emerged in the 1990s, lent impetus in part by the feminist critique of existing gender relations, went on to intervene in the local politics of gender and sexuality on many different fronts. For example, in 1993 a coalition of *tongzhi* from various groups called a meeting with the Legislative Yuan to discuss the issue of legal protection of homosexual human rights. In 1996, the Tongzhi Kongjian Xingdong Zhenxian (Tongzhi Space Alliance) lobbied against the redevelopment of Taiwan's best-known gay male cruising area in Taipei's New Park, holding a series of public fund-raising and informational activities and meeting several times with the Taipei City Government to present their case. Although homosexuality is not explicitly deemed a criminal offense in the legal code of the Republic of China, police persecution of cruising under statutes on crimes against "cultural decency" remains disturbingly common.²⁸ *Tongzhi* groups have been active in mobilizing public protest against police harassment, particularly in the latter half of the decade. *Tongzhi* activists were also involved throughout the decade in other grassroots political movements, such as supporting the licensed sex workers whose work licenses were summarily revoked by Chen Shui-bian's Taipei City Government in 1997.

The rapid and ongoing urbanization of Taiwanese society over the past thirty years means that increasingly, ties to the family and the hometown are weakened. As younger people move to the cities for study and work, they move away from the ties of blood family and are increasingly able to forge nontraditional modes of extrafamilial intimacy—encompassing modes of collective sociality based

on *tongzhi* identification as well as same-sex sexual relationships—while geographically distant families are relatively less able to exert pressure on children to marry. During this same period, the wane of centralized government authority over culture and the rise of a consumer society has meant that culture is determined increasingly by markets and decreasingly by government decree. (Lending weight to the idea that the commodification of culture tends to open up hitherto unguessed-at possibilities, Chi Tawei wryly notes the startling appearance of posters on the sides of buses in the mid-1990s advertising a product called “Queer Underpants.”)²⁹

The flourishing of commercial and social *tongzhi* subcultures in the 1990s had been preceded by the initial quiet stirrings of the movement in the 1980s.³⁰ Underground gay bars were already in existence at the beginning of that decade, while the first exclusively lesbian bars began to appear in its later years. HIV/AIDS activist Chi Chia-wei came out publicly to the media in 1986, but it wasn’t until 1990 that the first public lesbian or gay organization was founded—the lesbian social and activist group Women zhi Jian (Between Us; after the French film *Entre Nous*). In 1994 Women zhi Jian put out the first edition of its newsletter, *Nüpengyou* (Girl-friend), which is still published eight years later and has become a central medium for the reproduction of local lesbian subculture. In 1993 National Taiwan University’s gay student society, Gay Chat, was formed, prompting the formation of similar campus-based groups around the island in following years. In December 1993 the first aboveground lesbian or gay magazine, the lesbian *Ai bao* (Love paper) was launched. The ‘zine-style publication, which ran to four issues, was written and edited largely by graduate students from National Taiwan University and contained a mixture of theoretical and political articles, cartoons, poetry, and information about international lesbian icons like k.d. lang and The Indigo Girls.

In 1994 an islandwide local Internet system was established, enabling the beginnings of what proliferated over the second half of the 1990s into a massive interlinked local network of *tongzhi* Bulletin Board System sites, known as MOTSS boards (Members of the Same Sex), located largely on university servers and freely accessi-

ble to students. The emergence of the culture of *tongzhi wangyou* (*tongzhi* net-users) was immensely significant in the spread of the “imagined *tongzhi* community” into parts of the island distant from the big cities, and also into demographics, such as young students, unable to access public and commercial *tongzhi* cultures.³¹

In the same year, National Taiwan University’s official lesbian student group, the Lambda Society, was formed, and the third international Asian Lesbian Network conference was held in Taiwan, bringing together hundreds of women from all over Taiwan as well as from across the Asia-Pacific and South Asian regions, the United States, and Australia. The first edition of the glossy *tongzhi*-directed *Ge3L* magazine was released in 1996, and in 1998 was joined by the second such publication, *Together*.³²

Alongside and often in concert with *tongzhi* social, commercial, and political activity, there developed a lively and politicized *tongzhi* academic and publishing culture. From early in the decade, a cohort of diasporic intellectuals began returning to Taiwan following graduate study in feminism, lesbian and gay studies, and related disciplines in the United States and Europe. Now teaching in English departments at major universities, including National Taiwan University and National Taiwan Central University, these scholars began offering courses in lesbian and gay studies and queer theory, and were soon organizing regular conferences on sexuality studies. The year 1994 saw the opening of Nūshudian (Fembooks), a feminist bookstore initially associated with the independent feminist organization Funü Xinzhi Jijinhui (Women’s Awakening Foundation), which became a major stockist of lesbian, gay, and *tongzhi*-themed books and journals in Chinese and English. In December 1995, Gay Sunshine Press was established, Taiwan’s first and only publishing house to deal exclusively with *tongzhi* fiction and nonfiction titles in Chinese, including translations of English-language works. In the same year a group of scholars established the Center for the Study of Sexualities (Xing/Bie Yanjiushi) at National Taiwan Central University. The Center now hosts regular conferences and visiting scholars in the field of lesbian, gay, and sexuality studies.

Aside from the support the nascent *tongzhi* movement found

among other oppositional political movements and the impetus it gained from social factors like urbanization and the rise of a commodity culture, the official cultural policy of the KMT government in the 1990s increasingly, if always ambivalently, embraced a liberal sexual politics. Some have seen this as a means toward promulgating an international image of Taiwan as a liberal, democratic society in implicit contrast to the People's Republic of China's reputation for authoritarian rule and repression of heterodoxy.³³ Illustrative of this is the enthusiastic official support for Ang Lee's gay-themed film *The Wedding Banquet*, the product of a cooperation between the government-owned Central Motion Picture Corporation in Taipei and Good Machine Production in New York. Dr. Jason Hu, director general of Taiwan's Government Information Office at the time, stated publicly when the film won the Golden Bear at Berlin in 1993 that "the significant meaning of *The Wedding Banquet*'s success is to tell the world that Taiwan has not only attained economic miracles, it has achieved cultural miracles, as well."³⁴ The progressive, globalized, bourgeois (post-"economic miracle") construction of Taiwan projected by the film is linked closely to its representation of an elderly Taiwanese couple's uneasy acceptance of their expatriate gay son. Thus, in contrast to other states in the region (for example Malaysia, Singapore, or the People's Republic of China), the official line on homosexuality in Taiwan during this period, if there was one, was one of ambivalent "tolerance" rather than overt repression.³⁵

This general climate enabled the entry of the homosexual topic into public discourse in a number of unprecedented ways. Many queer-themed films were released throughout the 1990s; mainstream, art-house, experimental, and documentary. Aside from *The Wedding Banquet*, these also include Tsai Ming-liang's art-house trilogy *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), *Vive l'Amour* (1994), and *The River* (1996); Mickey Chen's documentaries *Not Simply a Wedding Banquet* (with Ming-Hsiu Chen, 1997) and *Beautiful Youth* (1998); Li Xiangru's lesbian documentary *2,1* (1999); Wu Mi-sen's art-house feature *Fluffy Rhapsody* (2000), and a series of short student films including Weng Ching-ting's *Voice of the Sunflower* (2000), Allen Chang and Chen Tayu's *Travelling* (2000), and Wang Junhua's *So Long* (2000).

In 1994 two major daily newspapers, the *China Times* and the *Taiwan Libao* began running weekly columns on *tongzhi* culture. And in 1995 the first regular *tongzhi* radio shows went to air on independent radio stations. In 1996, author and well-known public figure Hsu Yoshen (whose story “Stones on the Shore” appears in this volume) married his long-term male partner in a public ceremony in Taipei City, attended by a representative of its then mayor, now president, Chen Shui-bian.

One should not forget, however, that the increased visibility of *tongzhi* cultures within Taiwan’s public sphere has also precipitated the emergence of new forms of homophobic violence. In 2001, for example, the plate glass window of Gin Gin’s bookstore was repeatedly smashed, leading *tongzhi* groups to publicly protest what they viewed as a hate crime. Another instance of rising homophobia is what came to be known as the TTV News Incident of 1992. In March of that year, a female reporter from TTV, one of Taiwan’s three free-to-air stations, entered a lesbian bar with a hidden camera and filmed the bar’s patrons without their permission or their knowledge. The footage, together with the reporter’s strongly homophobic commentary, was aired on TTV’s evening news and caused the catastrophic “outing” of several of the women to their families. Under pressure from *tongzhi* groups, the National Press Council eventually ruled that the program had been inappropriate, and TTV was forced to apologize. Ultimately, Qu Meifeng, the female reporter responsible for the story, even did an interview with *Together* magazine, ostensibly in an effort to clear herself of the smear of homophobia, and the interview appeared along with a series of photographs of Qu herself in appealing, faintly lesbian-styled poses and outfits.³⁶ But similar incidents involving the outing of unsuspecting *tongzhi* by television news and documentary media continued to occur. There were at least two more major cases in 1998 alone, and media voyeurism continues to be an important target of organized *tongzhi* protest.³⁷

In addition to the social and historical factors discussed above, the rise of *tongzhi* cultures in 1990s Taiwan cannot be analyzed without a consideration of the role of global cultural flows. The emergence of dedicated centers, conferences, journal issues, books, and university

courses on nonstraight sexualities happened not in a vacuum but, in part, as a result of flows of scholarly knowledge into Taiwan from the circuits of globalizing lesbian and gay studies. Similarly, people's ways of understanding themselves as "gay" or "lesbian"—or, indeed, as *tongzhi*—did not well up spontaneously within individuals but arose, at least in part, as complex responses to the flows of globalizing gay style and politics. Given this, one set of questions raised by a collection like this one, which promises "queer fiction from Taiwan," is about the relationship between this apparently local and specific form of sexual identification in *tongzhi* and *ku'er*; and the Euro-American sexual cultures with which this volume's readers are likely to be more familiar. To pose the question in its crudest form, does the fiction collected here, now appearing alongside anthologies of lesbian and gay fiction from the United States, Britain, and Australia, simply represent an annex to Euro-American versions of nonstraight sexualities? Are the forms of dissident sexuality represented in these stories no more than far-flung expressions of a global and universal lesbian-and-gay movement and identity? Or, on the other hand, should we approach these stories as expressions of a unique and native form of sexual dissidence, particular and limited to Taiwan and with no necessary relation to more familiar sexual cultures?

Emphasizing as they do the intricate syncretisms of contemporary Taiwan cultures, the stories themselves suggest the inadequacy of this either/or approach to the question of this writing's linkage into global circuits versus its local particularity. For most of the stories gathered here, "Taiwan" itself is anything but a simple or self-evident cultural location. For the protagonist of Chu T'ien-wen's "Bodhisattva Incarnate," for example, personal memory of a childhood in 1960s Taiwan is populated with the televisual personae of Agent 99 of *Get Smart* and Sergeant Saunders of *Combat!* at the same time as it is overlaid with the theme song from the Taiwanese animated series *Jing Jing*. Wu Jiwen's "Rose Is the Past Tense of Rise" reveals a postwar Taiwan everywhere marked by the vestiges of the departed Japanese colonizer culture, while for the protagonist of Hsu Yoshen's "Stones by the Shore," "Taiwan" is a set of ambivalent and painful memories retrieved at a distance from his sojourn in

New York. The intellectual contexts of Qiu Miaojin's "Platonic Hair," Chu T'ien-hsin's "A Story of Spring Butterflies," and Lin Chun Ying's "Who is Singing?" are provided by Plato, Aristophanes, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Foucault, while the narrator of Lin Yuyi's "The Boy in the Pink Orchid Tree" recalls an adolescence spent reading Chinese philosophers Xiong Shili, Fang Dongmei, and Lao Sze-kwang, and Chinese historian Qian Mu. What the stories suggest, I think, is a local context characterized by its traffic with globalizing cultural flows, the location neither of a seamless absorption into global culture, nor of a pure and self-evident "cultural tradition."

As Chi Tawei proposes in his introduction to his two 1997 collections of queer fiction and theory from Taiwan, *ku'er* itself—and, I would add, also *tongzhi*—is best viewed as a kind of cultural hybrid, the syncretic product of "glocalization," or local appropriations of global discourses.³⁸ While the artistic, political, commercial, and subcultural emergence of *tongzhi* and *ku'er* cultures in 1990s Taiwan is clearly conditioned by globally mobile knowledge formations of lesbian, gay, and queer, nevertheless, when these formations reach Taiwan and take root, the specific cultural and historical conditions they encounter there—conditions, already, of cultural hybridity and mix—inevitably shape the forms of *tongzhi* and *ku'er* that arise. For example, as Chi also notes, while "queer" emerged in 1990s Euro-American contexts as a response to and critique of pre-existing lesbian and gay cultures and politics, the term *ku'er* was first used in Taiwan in the local journal *Isle Margin* in 1994, just two years after the local appropriation of the term *tongzhi*.³⁹ The uncanny simultaneity of the emergence of *tongzhi* sexual identity and *ku'er*'s post-structuralist identity critique suggests that the journey of lesbian, gay, and queer politics and theory to Taiwan follows the familiar pattern of disjuncture that Arjun Appadurai has argued characterizes cultural flow more generally in the era of globalization.⁴⁰

In its theoretical forms, *ku'er* did take on "queer's" poststructuralist preoccupation with deconstructing sexual identity. But it was less concerned with a critique of *tongzhi* politics—since these had only been around as such for a couple of years—than with a generalized critique of the politics of sexuality dominant in broader Taiwan soci-

ety at the time. The local anxieties Chi notes over whether under these circumstances *ku'er* could be considered a faithful translation of “queer” echo more general anxieties about the relationship between modern Taiwan literary culture and the “Western.”⁴¹ Criticisms that *ku'er* was merely slavishly derivative of Western models and inappropriate to Taiwan’s situation come uncannily close to the criticisms of Taiwanese literary modernism noted by Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang years earlier.⁴² Ironically, what these ongoing anxieties about the relationships between Taiwanese and Western literatures and cultures signify most clearly is the ineluctable *linkages* between the two. Literary and cultural critics are correct in noting the influence of Euro-American culture on contemporary Taiwanese literature, since a degree of Euro-American influence is indeed an inescapable condition of Taiwan’s literary and cultural modernities. The argument that the appropriation of Western models is “inappropriate” to a Taiwan context seems less convincing, though, given the enthusiasm with which such models continue to be taken up locally and the rich and prolific results produced from this cross-cultural cross-pollination, amply evidenced in the stories collected in this volume.

The authors whose work appears in this volume might be divided along very rough generational lines into two main groups. The first group includes those born between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s (Chu T'ien-wen, Chu T'ien-hsin, Lin Yuyi, Lin Chun Ying, Hsu Yoshen, and Wu Jiwen); the second, those born between the late 1960s and the early 1970s (Qiu Miaojin, Chen Xue, Hong Ling, and Chi Tawei). This division is reflected only partly in the ordering of the stories, which are organized according to their date of publication rather than the author’s date of birth. But the stylistic differences between the younger and older generation of writers are marked. In particular, while the older writers encompass a range of styles and narratorial techniques, the younger authors have enough in common stylistically and politically to be considered representative of *ku'er wenxue*, the more recent subgenre of *tongzhi wenxue*. These

younger writers, whose university years coincided with the first years of the *tongzhi* movement, are in general self-conscious about their status as “queer writers,” and address the topic of dissident sexualities in a direct and committed way in their writing. All of these younger writers—with the exception of Qiu Miaojin, who suicided at the age of just twenty-six, in 1995—were actively involved in the development of Taiwan’s intellectual and political *tongzhi* cultures throughout the decade. Chi Tawei suggests a provisional list of three characteristics that could be taken as definitive of *ku’er wenxue*.⁴³ First, it highlights the mutation and performance of identity both through its preponderance of metamorphosing characters such as vampires and werewolves (in Hong Ling’s writing), anthropomorphized animals (in Qiu Miaojin’s *The Crocodile’s Journal*), angels (in Chen Xue’s “Searching,” included here), and androids (in Chi Tawei’s *The Membranes*); and also through its playful narrative strategies that often obscure or problematize the identity of the narrator or protagonist (as in Qiu’s “Platonic Hair,” included here). Second, it emphasizes erotic fluidity and multiplicity rather than suggesting any clearly defined model of sexual identity. Third—and, I would suggest, most definitively—*ku’er wenxue* is marked by its highly committed political critique of existing forms of sexual and gendered power in present-day Taiwan. Among the stories collected here, such a critique is particularly evident in Chi’s own “A Stranger’s ID” and Qiu Miaojin’s “Platonic Hair.”

Despite the stylistic, political, and generational divisions between the *ku’er* writers and their slightly older counterparts, some common themes and preoccupations are evident across the collection. Most obvious among these is the question of relationships with blood family, which as Chris Berry notes in relation to queer East Asian cinema, sets these works apart from their Euro-American counterparts, which tend to de-emphasize the relationships of lesbian and gay characters to family.⁴⁴ It is the dominance of the ideologies of family in the cultural context of Taiwan and the tectonic shifts in the practices and meanings of “family” following the immense social upheavals of the past fifty years that compel these authors to explore homosexual identification in relation to the experience of blood

family. But the forms of family and “family values” that are represented in these stories are anything but simple or naively celebratory. Hsu Yoshen’s story centers on the gay protagonist’s conflicted and unresolved relationship with his father and includes the stories of two secondary characters estranged from their blood families, due to the latter’s rejection of their homosexuality. Both Chen Xue’s and Hong Ling’s stories thematize deeply ambivalent, troubled relationships between mothers and daughters, which oscillate between intense sexual love and violently destructive hatred. Wu Jiwen’s “Rose Is the Past Tense of Rise,” meanwhile, is the story of a man’s transgender journey toward becoming a woman, told within the context of the family, from aunt to nephew. The aunt’s narrative concludes with a stark statement of how her gender transition immediately became the family’s biggest secret and taboo. If blood family is central to these stories, then, it figures less as a self-evident or stable manifestation of “cultural tradition” than as a staging ground for rethinkings of individual subjectivities in relation to the often competing and always deeply-felt claims of both family and sexuality. In this process the notion of “family” is itself refigured and transformed as a result of the unorthodox desires that inhabit and haunt it.

The reworking of traditional gender formations is another theme found in more than one of these stories, and this reworking bespeaks a critical, *tongzhi* deconstruction of normative gender as much as it indexes the broader project of reimagining masculinities and femininities for Taiwan’s contemporary, posttraditional cultures.⁴⁵ Qiu Miaojin’s “Platonic Hair” is at once the clearest and most complex example of this, with its figuration of a “T” (comparable but not reducible to the English-language category “butch”) lesbian masculinity that approximates male masculinity both in sartorial style (suits, short hair, and aftershave) and in its erotic attraction to femininity. Here, sexual nonconformity is marked by a form of specifically lesbian gender crossing. Chu T’ien-hsin’s “A Story of Spring Butterflies,” also, self-consciously subverts the reader’s preconceptions regarding the narrator’s gender identity—though in this case with quite different consequences. Wu Jiwen’s male-to-female transgendered character, meanwhile, is driven in his early

years by a desire that is less an erotic attraction to other men than a yearning for a feminine gender identity. Each of these stories intimates the inextricable conceptual linkage of sexual with gender definition, while also suggesting the possibility of creative reconfigurations of both by variously queer subjects.

Written as they were during the 1990s, a decade in which Taiwanese people were themselves more than ever transnationally mobile in travel, overseas education, and long-term immigration, it's not surprising that several of these stories are concerned with the complexities of desire and sexual identification in diaspora. The clearest example is Hsu Yoshen's "Stones on the Shore," about a Taiwanese man who falls in love with a mainland Chinese dancer in New York City and through their relationship is able to move toward a resolution of his conflicted feelings about his family, Taiwan, and his own cultural identification as Chinese. As well as emphasizing the characters' final rejection of racist American "rice queen" culture, this story suggests a queering of the idea of "Chineseness" itself through its linkage of the protagonist's desire for Chinese cultural identity with his sexual desire for the mainland Chinese man Meng Gang. Lin Chun Ying's story, too, contains a section in which the narrator looks back at Taiwan from a lonely sojourn as a student in New York; here again Taiwan appears in the memory of the diasporic subject as something ambivalently desired: the location of an identificatory plenitude now irretrievably lost. The protagonist of Wu Jiwen's story similarly experiences Taiwan as lost origin, this time from the perspective of Japan. Taiwan, for this character, is a homeland so distant as to border on the illusory. When approached by a Japanese man who grew up in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation and now feels homesick for the island, Wu's protagonist creates for him a "fictive nostalgia" of Taiwan, describing "the picture of a childhood foreign even to himself." Each of these stories examines, in a different way, the intricate connections between sexuality and cultural location, and the unpredictable rescriptings of identification and desire that inevitably take place with mobility across geographic divides.⁴⁶

What most clearly brings the *tongzhi wenxue* presented here together as a coherent body of work for an international readership is that, whether implicitly or explicitly, each of the stories calls into question the social structures that deny a legitimate place to individuals who cannot or will not perform heterosexual “normality.” As a literary movement, *tongzhi wenxue* effects a sustained critique of the status quo on sexuality that has stood so long unchallenged in Taiwan; indeed, this is also in large part what enables it to be appropriated and enjoyed by local *tongzhi* readerships. More than this, though, these stories compel a fundamental rethinking of the place and effects of queer sexualities within culture. Documenting the unpredictable micromovements of desire in everyday life, they figure the abiding copresence of nonstraight eroticisms *within* the school (Lin Yuyi), the family (Chen Xue, Hong Ling, and Wu Jiwen), the city (Chu T’ien-wen and Chi Tawei), and even marriage (Chu T’ien-hsin). In doing this, the stories collected here reveal the stirrings of unsettling desires at the very heart of contemporary Taiwan’s society and culture.

NOTES

1. “Queer” is a term that emerged in the early 1990s in academic and activist circles as a critique of the identity politics of the earlier lesbian and gay studies and movement. The term was adopted in various ways in Taiwan during the same period. For further discussion see pp. 17–18.

2. The only exception to this is Chen Xue’s “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel,” which appeared in my translation in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 7:1 (Spring 1999), 51–69. It was retranslated by Patricia Sieber in her (ed.) *Red Is Not the Only Color: Contemporary Chinese Fiction on Love and Sex between Women, Collected Stories* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) under the title “In Search of the Lost Wings of the Angels,” 153–168.

3. On Taiwan’s early settlement by Han Chinese from Fujian, see Chen Kongli, *Taiwan lishi wangyao* (An outline of Taiwan’s history) (Taipei: Renjian, 1996: 17–31). For a more extended discussion of Taiwan vis-à-vis postcoloniality, see Ping-Hui Liao, “Postcolonial Studies in Taiwan: Issues in Critical Debates,” *Postcolonial Studies* 2:2 (July 1999): 199–211.

4. Minnan language is the dialect of Hokkien spoken in the south of

Fujian province and on Taiwan. In Taiwan it is also known colloquially, and in line with Taiwanese nativist sentiment, as *Taiyu* or “Taiwanese.” See Chen Kongli, *Taiwan lishi*, 319–325, 367–369, and Allen Chun, “The Culture Industry as National Enterprise: The Politics of Heritage in Contemporary Taiwan,” *Culture and Policy* 6:1 (1994): 69–89.

5. Hao Yuxiang, “Wo shi shei?!: Lun baling niandai Taiwan xiaoshuo-zhongde zhengzhi miwang” (Who Am I?! — The confusion of identity in Taiwanese fiction of the 1980s), *Zhongwai wenxue* (Chung-wai literary monthly) 26:12 (May 1998): 150–170. See also Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, “Introduction,” in *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 1–22.

6. On modernism and nativism, see Chang, *Modernism*. On 1980s literature, see also Meng Fan and Lin Yaode, “Yi dangdai shiye shuxie baling niandai Taiwan wenxue shi” (Writing 1980s Taiwanese literary history from the point of view of the present), in Meng and Lin, eds., *Shijimo pianbang: Baling niandai Taiwan wenxue lun* (Toward the millenium: 1980s Taiwan literary criticism) (Taipei: Shibao, 1990), 5–12; Chen Sihe, “Dan kai fengqi bu wei shi: Lun Taiwan xin shidai xiaoshuo zai wenxueshishangde yiyi” (On the literary-historical significance of Taiwan’s new fiction), in Meng and Lin, eds., *Shijimo*, 327–360; Lin Yaode, “Baling niandai Taiwan dushi wenxue” (Taiwan’s 1980s Urban Literature), in *ibid.*, 361–397; Ye Shitao, *Taiwan wenxuede kunjing* (The dilemma of Taiwanese literature) (Kaohsiung: Paise, 1992); and Liu Chuncheng, *Taiwan wenxuede liangge shijie* (The Two Worlds of Taiwanese Literature) (Kaohsiung, Taiwan: Paise, 1992).

7. For a Marxist critique of the celebration of *houxiandai* by 1980s writers, see Lü Zhenghui, “Baling niandai Taiwan xiaoshuode zhuliu” (Mainstream fiction in 1980s Taiwan), in Meng and Lin, eds., *Shijimo*, 269–292. For a postcolonial critique of the appropriation of *houxiandai* in Taiwan, see Chen Fangming, “Houxiandai huo houzhuimin: Zhanhou Taiwan wenxueshide yige jieyi” (Postmodern or postcolonial: An interpretation of postwar Taiwan’s literary history), in Chou Ying-hsiung and Liu Joyce Chi-hui, eds., *Shuxie Taiwan: Wenxueshi, houzhuimin yu houxiandai* (Writing Taiwan: Strategies of representation) (Taipei: Rye Field, 2000), 41–64.

8. Lin, “Baling Niandai,” 376. Again, Hao Yuxiang suggests that “new generation” writing reflects the dissolution of national, cultural, and individual “identities,” as Taiwan culture is subject to the effects of postmodernist pluralism, increasing commodification, and cultural globalization (166). See also Ye Shitao, *Taiwan wenxuede kunjing*, 35–38.

9. Huang Fan and Lin Yaode's (eds.) 12-volume collection, *Xin shidai xiaoshuo daxi* (Great series of new era fiction) (Taipei: Xidai, 1989), divides the short stories of writers born after 1949 into eleven genres: political, urban, industrial/commercial, rural, psychological, historical/war, science fiction, mystery, martial arts, school/university, and romantic fiction. See also Liu Chuncheng, *Taiwan wenxuede liangge*. Cf. Lü Zhenghui, who links this new pluralist literary scene to the commodification of culture, comparing it with the "choices" offered by the late capitalist marketplace.

10. Chou Ying-hsiung, "Shuxie Taiwande liangnan celüe" (The strategic dilemma of writing Taiwan), in Chou Ying-hsiung and Liu Joyce Chi-hui, eds., *Shuxie Taiwan*, 16–17.

11. Literary prizes or placings have also been won by Chu T'ien-hsin, Lin Yuyi, and Lin Chun Ying for other work.

12. See An Keqiang, ed., *Loulan nü yu Liu Yue Qing* (The Lou-lan girl and June Blue) (Taipei: Re'ai, 1999) for a collection of commended stories. The 1998 prize was won by the young author Huang Huo for his homoerotic "The Lou-lan Girl and June Blue."

13. For an annotated bibliography of Chinese fiction from 1974–1997 that touches on same-gender eroticism or love, see Chi Tawei, ed., *Ku'er kuanghuanjie: Taiwan dangdai queer wenxue duben* (Queer carnival: A reader of the queer literature in Taiwan) (Taipei: Metamedia, 1997), 249–262. There exists a substantial body of scholarship on the literary construction of femininity and feminine intimacies in modern Chinese fiction. See for example Wendy Larson, *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Sally Taylor Lieberman, *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); Lydia H. Liu, "Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature," in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, eds., *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002); Tze-lan Deborah Sang, "Translating Homosexuality: The Discourse of *Tongxing ai* in Republican China," in Lydia H. Liu, ed., *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), and "The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1996); Xueping Zhong, "Sisterhood? Representations of Women's Relationships in Two Contemporary Chinese Texts," in Tonglin Lu, ed., *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society* (New York:

SUNY Press, 1993). Patricia Sieber offers a concise summary of some of this work in her Introduction to *Red Is Not the Only Color*; 1–35.

14. Pai Hsien-yung, “Mantianli liangjingjingde xingxing” (A sky full of bright, twinkling stars), in Alberto Manguel and Craig Stephenson, eds., *The Flamingo Anthology of Gay Literature: In Another Part of the Forest* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 284–290. A revised translation by Pai Hsien-yung and Patia Yasin appears in Pai Hsien-yung, *Taipei People*, Chinese-English bilingual ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000), 311–325. Pai Hsien-yung, *Crystal Boys* (*Niezi*), trans. Howard Goldblatt (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1995).

15. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

16. Chi Tawei, ed., *Ku’er kuanghuanjie*; Yang Zongrun, ed., *Zhongli xun ta* (Searching for him in the crowd) (Taipei: Gay Sunshine Press, 1996), and *Nande you qing* (A rare love) (Taipei: Gay Sunshine Press, 1997); and An Keqiang, ed., *Loulun*. See also Lu Jianxiong, ed., *Tata tatade gushi* (His stories, her stories) (Hong Kong: Worldson, 1996), which includes short *tongzhi* fiction from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China.

17. *Women zhi jian*’s discussion board is accessed from <<http://home.kimo.com.tw/wzjj.tw>> (accessed 27 Feb 2002); the *Tongzhi wenxueyuan* is at <<http://w02.wantclick.com/tempHtml/9266.htm?date=11>> (accessed 27 Feb 2002).

18. <<http://www.geocities.com/great5466/book/novel.htm>> (accessed 27 Feb 2002). See also Liu Jialing, “Kanjian tongzhi—Taiwan tongzhi wenxue yu yundong” (Seeing *tongzhi*: Taiwan’s *tongzhi* fiction and movement), at <<http://www.books.com.tw/activity/world-page/0914.htm>> (accessed 27 Feb 2002). Liu’s article refers to the writing of Pai Hsien-yung, Hsu Yoshen, and Qiu Miaojin, and discusses Wu Jiwen’s *Galaxies in Ecstasies*.

19. For example, *Chengpin yuedu* (Eslite book review) 17 (September 13–25, 1994), Special Issue on “*Tongxinglian*” (Homosexuality); *Daoyu bianyuan* (Isle margin) 10 (January 1994), Special Issue on *Queer*, in which Chen Xue’s “Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel” first appeared (91–102); *Zhongwai wenxue* (Chung-wai literary monthly) 289 (June 1996) Special Issue on *Tongzhi lunshu* (Queer studies); *Chung-wai Literary Monthly* 303 (August 1997), Special Issue on *Yanyi xing yu xingbie: Ku’er xiaoshuo yu yanjiu* (Proliferating sexual and gender differences: Queer studies and queer fiction), ed. Liou Liang-ya; *Chung-wai Literary Monthly* 312 (May 1998), Special Issue on *Guaitai qingyuxue* (Queer sexuality), ed. Chang Hsiao-hung;

Lianhe wenxue (Unitas) 148 (February 1997), Special Issue on *Feichang aiyou: Tongzhibixue, tongzhi wenxue* (A different love: *Tongzhi* studies, *Tongzhi* fiction).

20. For a detailed discussion of Chen's story in these terms, see Fran Martin, "Chen Xue's Queer Tactics," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 7:1 (Spring 1999): 71–94.

21. The one exception in this regard is the excerpt that appears here from Wu Jiwen's 1998 novel, *Galaxies in Ecstasies*, which stands equally well on its own as a piece of short fiction, as it in fact originally appeared when serialized in the *China Times*.

22. See Xiao Wenhui, "Zheige ren feichang Lin Yihua" (This guy is very Edward Lam), in *Chengpin Yuedu* (Eslite book review) 17 (Sept 13–25, 1994): 54–56.

23. On the entry of the medical discourse on homosexuality into China during the Republican period, see Tze-lan Deborah Sang, "Translating Homosexuality," 1999, and "Emerging Lesbian," 1996: 95–107, and Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 137–145.

24. For example, see Ni Jiazhen, "Jiuling niandai tongxinglian lunshu yu yundong zhuti zai Taiwan" (Homosexuality theory and activism's agency on 1990s Taiwan), in He Chunrui, ed., *Xing/bie yanjiude xin shiye* (Visionary essays in sexuality/gender studies), Vol. 1 (Taipei: Metamedia, 1997), 125–148. Sun's pronouncement in Mandarin is "*Geming shangwei chenggong, tongzhi reng xu nuli*."

25. *Ku'er* appears perhaps most prominently in Chi Tawei's two collections of *ku'er* literature and theory, *Queer Carnival* and *Ku'er qishilü: Taiwan dangdai queer lunshu duben* (Queer archipelago: A reader of the queer discourses in Taiwan) (Taipei: Metamedia, 1997).

26. See also Sieber, "Introduction," in her (ed.) *Red Is Not the Only Color*, 1–35.

27. For further discussion see Tze-lan Deborah Sang, "Feminism's Double: Lesbian Activism in the Mediated Public Sphere of Taiwan," in Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, ed., *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 132–161.

28. The laws most often used to prosecute those showing homosexual behavior in public are those which criminalize *fangbai shanliang fengsu* (the endangering of fine customs and traditions) (Article 2, Clauses 80–84 in the "Laws for the Protection of Social Order," in Zhang Zhiben and Lin Jidong, eds., *Zui.xin liufa quanshu* [The latest edition of the six legal categories] [Taipei:

Da Zhongguo, 1996]), and those which specify *fangbai fenghua zui* (the crime of endangering cultural decency) (Criminal Law Article 16, clauses 224, 225, 227, 233, Zhang and Lin, eds., *Zui xin*, 390). See also note 35.

29. Chi, *Archipelago*, 9.

30. References for the social history sketched here are Zheng Meili, *Nü'er quan: Taiwan nütongzhide xingbie, jiating yu quannei shenghuo* (Girls' circle: Taiwan lesbians' gender, family, and lesbian life) (Taipei: Nüshu, 1997); Taida Nütongxinglian Wenhua Yanjiushe (Lambda), *Women shi nütongxinglian* (We are lesbians) (Taipei: Shiren, 1995); Yuanyuan Chuanbo Qihua Xiaozu (Yuanyuan Broadcasting Planning Committee), *Airen tongzhi* (Tongzhi lover) (Taipei: Jin Bolo, 1996); and Antonia Yengning Chao, "Embodying the Invisible: Body Politics in Constructing Contemporary Taiwanese Lesbian Identities" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1996), 28–46.

31. See Chris Berry and Fran Martin, "Syncretism and Synchronicity: Queer'n'Asian Cyberspace in 1990s Taiwan and Korea," in Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue, eds., *Mobile Cultures: New Media and Queer Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2003).

32. However, both these magazines had ceased publication by 2001.

33. Cindy Patton, "Yuwang yinxing hongzhaji: Xinxing guojiazhong 'yiji' quanqiu hua zhi xianxiang" (Stealth bombers of desire: The globalization of 'alterity' in emerging democracies), trans. Zhuang Ruilin, in Center for the Study of Sexualities, ed., *Working Papers in Gender/Sexuality Studies* 3–4 (1998): 301–323.

34. Quoted in Peng Jinhua, "*Xi yan yongbao jinxiong jiang*: Taiwan dianying yangmei guoji" (*The Wedding Banquet* embraces the Golden Bear Award: Taiwan movies win high acclaim at Berlin Film Festival), *Cosmorama*, April 1993, 9.

35. Of course, this does not mean that in practice all harassment of *tongzhi* automatically ceased. Despite the cultural policy linking Taiwan with liberal sexual politics, as noted above, police harassment of publicly cruising *tongzhi* went on more or less unabated. See Lin Hsien-hsiu, "Tian zheme hei feng zheme da baba zenme hai bu huijia? — Wuguan 'tongzhi yexing quan'" ("The wind's so fierce and the sky's so black, how come Daddy's still not back? — Nothing to do with 'tongzhi's' right to walk out at night"), *Tugou* (Together) 1, January 1998, 22–24.

36. Ding Wenling and Yin Xiangzhi, "He tongzhi woshou: Zhuanfang huati renwu — Qu Meifeng" (Shaking hands with *tongzhi*: Special interview with the topical Qu Meifeng), *Tugou* (Together) 1 (January 1998): 115–118.

37. In 1998, a reporter from the Dong Sen cable network illicitly filmed the

premiere of Mickey Chen's gay-themed film *Beautiful Youth*. Footage from the film was included in a TV program, accompanied by strongly homophobic commentary, and even after vociferous protest from *tongzhi* groups no apology was forthcoming. The same year saw a similar incident involving a CTS news crew secretly filming at a lesbian bar. See protest site at <<http://www.womenet.org.tw/action/film/protest.html>> (accessed 10 December, 1999).

38. Chi, *Archipelago*, 11, and *Carnival*, 11. Liou Liang-ya concurs on the productive hybridity of 1990s erotic fiction in its cross-fertilization with Euro-American and Japanese thought. Liou, *Yuwang gengyishi: Qingse xiaoshuode zhengzhi yu meixue* (Engendering dissident desires: The politics and aesthetics of erotic fictions) (Taipei: Metamedia, 1998), 9–10.

39. Chi, *Archipelago*, 9–16.

40. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 27–47.

41. Chi, *Archipelago*, 10–11.

42. Chang, *Modernism*, 5–7.

43. Chi, *Archipelago*, 13–15.

44. Chris Berry, "Asian Values, Family Values: Film, Video, and Lesbian and Gay Identities," in *Journal of Homosexuality* 40:3–4 (2001), Special Issue on *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, ed. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan: 211–232. In *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston cites a discourse common in the U.S. that presumes the conceptual opposition of "gayness" to "kinship," meaning that overwhelmingly, "claiming a lesbian or gay identity has been portrayed as a rejection of 'the family' and a departure from kinship." Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 22.

45. I use the term "posttraditional" not to imply that contemporary Taiwanese cultures exist "after" tradition in a literal sense; the "post" in this term is meant more in the spirit of Rey Chow's definition of the "post" in "postcolonial," meaning something like "under the continuing, though transformed, influence of." Rey Chow, *Ethnic After Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 150–151.

46. For a detailed discussion of sexuality and diaspora, see Benigno Sánchez-Eppler and Cindy Patton, "Introduction: With a Passport Out of Eden," in Patton and Sánchez-Eppler, eds., *Queer Diasporas* (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 1–14.

BODHISATTVA INCARNATE



CHU T' IEN-WEN

Chu T'ien-wen (b. 1956) is a prolific and critically acclaimed novelist, essayist, and screenwriter. Her *Notes of a Desolate Man* (1994) won the prestigious *China Times* Novel Prize and was later translated into English by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Li. She wrote the screenplay for *City of Sadness* (1989), perhaps the best-known film of one of Taiwan's most eminent film directors, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and has collaborated with him on numerous other films. Chu T'ien-wen is the sister of author Chu T'ien-hsin (this volume).

The reaction from Taiwan's *tongzhi* readerships and intellectuals to Chu's stories of alienated male homosexuality has been a mixed one. Some critics took issue with her work's frequent references to arcane literary and cultural theories, which they charged obscure the more immediate political potential of the writing and make male homosexuality merely an abstracted sign of fin-de-siècle decadence. Doubts were also raised about the legitimacy of a female writer appropriating the voice of a male homosexual—

against which criticism Chu defended herself by emphasizing her familiarity with gay-themed films and related modes of queer cultural production. However, Chi Tawei counters such critical assessments of Chu's writing by noting its productively indeterminate, open-ended character and criticizing the essentialism of those who insist that the sexuality of a fictional protagonist should match that of his author.¹

This story, first serialized in the *United Daily* newspaper (February 16–21, 1989) and then collected in Chu's *Fin de Siècle Splendor* (1990), adumbrates *Notes of a Desolate Man* in its literary style, gay male subject matter, and thematization of memory and loss. Chu's prose, with its experimental technique and heavy intertextuality, exemplifies the postmodernist turn in Taiwanese literature of the 1980s and 1990s. The milieu in which this story unfolds, too—with its highway overpasses, ubiquitous brand names, boutique bars, and traditional teahouses alongside McDonald's restaurants—represents a particular, dystopic view of the postmodern commodity culture of contemporary Taipei. The narrator's lost childhood world of the 1960s and 1970s, meanwhile, is associated with old television advertising jingles and the enduring piquancy of his first love, and the story's meditation on desire and transcendence is overlaid with echoes of Buddhist asceticism. Through its sensuous, almost cinematic descriptions of the scenes and textures of the narrator's past and present, this story evokes the complex psychic world of a homosexual intellectual immersed in the alienating and rapidly transforming culture of late-twentieth-century Taipei.



Summer this year was like the summer of the year he was fifteen.

The sun shone forever straight down from high in the sky; all creation was shadowless. The atmosphere that year was still largely unpolluted and the mountains and rivers spread resplendent over the earth. The moment you left the house the dazzling silver day robbed you of your bearings. He'd lost himself to the best basketball player in the neighborhood, Jabbar.²

Jabbar's basketball, it was magic! Honestly.

Jabbar pushed him against the wall. The breath Jabbar expelled permeated the room and etherized him with the scent of musk and pine resin.

It was as if he were pressed inside the cool of the damp, mildewy wall, then smashed to pieces, smashed into a crock full of dripping shooting-star rain. At that moment he heard the heavens let down a deluge.

When he came to, he was standing under the old banyan tree as a shining downpour fell outside. But the rain sounded scary. As it fell on the tree's leaves and on the awnings it sounded like the end of the world. Despite the heavy rain, though, it wasn't at all wet under the tree. Outside, half the rain steamed off in mid-air, while the rest raised a rank, scalding dust all around as it hit the earth.

Jabbar stood by his side, copper mountain, iron citadel, shouting Little Tong, Little Tong I'm sorry.

He felt Jabbar's deep eyes looking at him. They, too, were full of the narcotic scent of pine resin and held him fast, like a toad under the snake's stare with no choice but to be eaten. All at once the hundred thousand hairs of the banyan tree were set aflutter and all the rain was swept back up to the sky.

This year the light reflected off the atmosphere. Every afternoon as he floated in the local swimming pool, looking up into the infinitely transparent firmament, the same damn questions that had been asking themselves for thousands of years directed themselves suddenly to him from out of infinity. Why live? What's life for, in the end?

Some questions! Enraged, he raised a middle finger at the motherfucking sky, fuck it to hell. He turned and swam furiously for thirteen laps, using his still-ample strength to gag that distant, age-old mouth. His energy exhausted, he died on the water.

But he also had moments of weakness. Thirty bloody years old—in these circles, thirty was ancient. Soaking in the suspiciously blue water of the pool, he became a blue fish. His tears welled up and streamed out, trickling from his temples to converge with the blue water. South Sea mermaids' tears turned to pearls, but as for him, he was nothing, merely allowing his life to pour away while inside he was thoroughly dried up.

He'd long since stopped going to the saunas because of the spread of AIDS. Today he'd been driven here by those thoroughly dried-up

insides of his, only to be left stunned by the spectacle of ruin. Of a once flourishing purgatory there now remained only sulfurous smoke rising from remnant embers. This was the new form taken by souls wandering from the bygone flood of desire, and it rose in a continuous dying thread that disappeared amid beams of light. Who'd come here now but this handful of tragic old trash!

Trash. His own body, too, seemed insipid to the point of revulsion. He sat there obstinately taking no notice of anyone, an old bonito fish dried to a husk. Dimly he recalled that precious dried bonito of his mother's, whose smell dominated the olfactory world of his childhood. Only for guests was it taken out of its drawer in the kitchen cabinet, pared down to a pile of shavings with a great exertion of the vegetable knife, and put into a pot with tofu and cabbage to make soup. That lethal bonito, which hit the ground with a bang if you dropped it, seemed not to grow any smaller each time it was pared down, then wrapped up and put back in the drawer: It was always the same size. In the end it was made a present for Second Auntie.

The body is a burden, let it be pared away and disappear! But he felt a pair of eyes watching him.

It's no use. After the violence of passion like a lightning strike, there remained only boundless, limitless, endless, soundless ennui, a desert like a sea of sand engulfing his spirit. He laughed coldly to himself, I'm not interested. Raising his monk's eyes, he looked toward the eyes that watched him.

For an instant, they looked at each other. There in the wide latitudes of a vacant heart, he met him.

It's no use. It's the shadow of an imagined bubble; it's dew; it's electricity. He said this to the tremulous melancholy voices that arose within him. But those eyes, those eyes were like the eyes that had stripped him of his innocence when he was seventeen, saturated with a narcotic scent that pulled him strongly. Dragged by its force he went with him, as natural and fated as a flower with a bee.

High up on the tenth floor they faced each other naked. A highway overpass swept by outside the window with lights that radiated a sheet of tangerine; the passing traffic sped over their heads in a

roar of orange. He extended his hands to embrace him; he did the same. They each embraced the other, both wanting to give at the same time. It was a confused and hasty union that came to an end soon after.

They lay side by side on the pillow. It was dark inside, and outside the lights on the bridge made an orange sky and a tangerine sea like twilight on the wasteland, reflecting inside to paint a layer of rusty verdigris on their naked bodies. They'd made a hash of it, and he avoided looking at him. His was an authentically manly physique, solid and strong.

He arose to put on his clothes, and he, too, got up to dress. The room was filled with the sounds of dressing, belt buckles and key rings making a wild clanging and jangling, terrifying. Then suddenly it all stopped; in an instant noise ceased and the silence was suffocating. He saw a truck with *EVERGREEN* written on it soar by outside the window.³

Evergreen, said Little Tong, breaking the silence.

What? he asked.

I've got a friend who worked like a dog for Evergreen, Little Tong said. Evergreen sea freight. My friend was at sea for two years, then came ashore and got married.

He said, My name's Zhong Lin, what's yours?

Let's go, said Little Tong.

Zhong Lin was half a head taller than him, frank and unaffected, not clingy. He'd known many, and his gut feeling told him that this time he'd found something special. Will you tell me your phone number, he asked.

What's your name? Zhong Lin asked him again.

He thought a moment, then told him his real name, Call me Little Tong.

He extended his hand to let Zhong Lin write his phone number pricklingly on his palm. Can I call you?

Zhong Lin gave a jerk of his jaw to signify yes while the corner of his mouth turned up in a smile. Strange, that was the smile of the boys from the veterans' neighborhood.⁴ The smile he knew so well that he'd forgotten it had reappeared. I'll see you off.

No, I'll see you off, Zhong Lin said.

I'll see you off. He took his hand, and he took his. It felt more intimate than in bed. Over a summer night street like ebony and aloes wood, high in the vast, watery atmosphere floated a round red light, which after a moment turned to green. Lower down, a little bright yellow lamp suddenly floated over and stopped in front of them, a dark blue taxi. Their hands had parted but their eyes lingered tenderly.

Panicked, he asked him, Do you want to have a drink?

Let's, Zhong Lin said.

The taxi had already moved off. They walked for a while enveloped in the remnant coolness of the air-conditioning and the scent of soap, shoulder to shoulder, with minds purged of all desire, perfect. A countertide of dew drowned all the buildings, leaving only the great unextinguished neon signs like constellations floating on the air. A full moon fished itself from the water and followed them, dripping wet. After walking a while they, too, were wet from head to toe. They took a cab to *My Place* and entered as if coming in out of the rain.

A Long Island Iced Tea, no, an Iceland Long Tea, he joked with Jasmine.

Jasmine had changed her hairstyle. A thick fringe hung over her eyebrows, and her straight hair fell to the middle of her ears, with the ends rolled under in a tight curl back toward her neck. Her glossy black hair was slicked with mousse into the old-fashioned style. She asked what Zhong Lin wanted to drink.

Zhong Lin ordered a Manhattan.

With his index finger he brushed aside a lock of black hair from the center of Zhong Lin's forehead; brushed aside, it fell back. The dew had stuck their hair closely to their heads, accentuating his fine features, bewitching as a snake. He might almost be mistaken for the man of the past.

You look as if you hated everyone, Zhong Lin said.

Do I? Actually he felt glad; at least that set him apart from other people.

Sitting there by yourself, your face seems frosted with salt, Zhong Lin said. One wouldn't dare approach you.

Really? He truly was a mummy, thoroughly salted in the sea of desire and the abyss of passion. So that's why you approached me?

I'm kidding, just having a laugh, why do you have to be so miserable. Zhong Lin's voice held a challenge.

He wanted to hold him down and kiss him. How lucky you are, *my lover*. One day I'll teach you to have so much fun you'll want no more; to play till you want to vomit, so a good death seems preferable to a wretched life!

When that happens I'll *marry*, Zhong Lin said.

Even though he'd used English in place of the Chinese words for "marry," his heart trembled. He laughed coldly. You're very lucky.

Little Tong, Zhong Lin called him passionately, calling him back, Little Tong, calling him back to himself.

Zhong, you're cruel, he laughed grimly, cruel!

It's not like that, Little Tong. I'm telling you, I think you're different, I want to tell you up front I've got a *girlfriend*. We've known each other almost five years, and we've *done it*. I think we'll end up together—after being together so long, right, Little Tong. Zhong Lin jerked his chin at him and twisted his mouth in a smile, half-imperious, half-indulgent, forcing him to concede.

He gave a doleful laugh. Does she know?

No.

And she doesn't pressure you? He looked into Zhong Lin's eyes, pure as snow, ah what an exquisite thing, he thought admiringly. So you switched teams at halftime?

It was done to me once when I was drunk, Zhong Lin said.

Do you go there often? That memorable place where they'd met.

Today was my second time, Zhong Lin said. You're different from the others I've met, have I led you astray?

What's the difference, he said with an air of detachment. Isn't it all the same.

Oh *no*, Zhong Lin tried to cheer him up, this is very different.

Actually it wouldn't be bad to be straight—he was suddenly filled

with rancor—at least they can't help it, but we fall of our own free will.

If you're going to be like that then I give up. Zhong Lin called him, Hey, Little Tong, hey, cheer up, and struck his glass against his with a clink.

He gazed at him in open-mouthed disbelief, as he felt burning tears of wax dripping onto his heart, burning a hole through it. Zhong, do you love her?

Zhong Lin thought for a moment, I guess so.

Then you deserve to die.

I agree. Zhong Lin hung his head, dejected, like an innocent sunflower.

He'd forgiven him already. Would it cause problems if I call you?

No. Zhong Lin took his hand and wrote another number, This is at home, call in the evening. It's my Ma and Pa and elder sister. If a hoarse voice answers, that's my sister. She's at the end of the line, can't find a husband.

He sighed. You don't even want my number.

Zhong Lin gave him his palm, grinning broadly. The lines on his palm were clear, the bones of his hand large. The numbers written on his palm were surely fated to be washed away, they wouldn't be remembered, he knew. Drink, drink.

If you want to we can, Zhong Lin said.

He didn't dare look at him. His benevolent grace offered him salvation, but thanks very much, he didn't want to be saved. He said, I only want to if you do.

Anytime, really Little Tong, Zhong Lin said, you just say the word, call me.

Part of his gaze moved off to one side beyond Zhong Lin's temple to where a row of long-stemmed glasses hung upside down over the bar like icy grapes. He looked far off into the limitless distance, letting go of earthly wisdom and abandoning himself to natural feeling. Part of his gaze remained, wandering in the vicinity of Zhong Lin's body, reluctant to part with it. A lover's heart, elusive as a needle at the bottom of the sea. He slapped the back of one hand into the palm of the other: Forget it. What year were you born?

Nineteen fifty-seven, Zhong Lin said.

Surprising, he didn't look it. Here's to kids of the fifties, I'm '56.

Zhong Lin knitted his brows and sized him up, You don't look it. He thumped him on the shoulder. You know, now the streets are full of kids of the sixties, it's crazy.

He liked this brotherly camaraderie, and his heart warmed and relaxed. Even seventies kids are turning up now! He looked after his body the same way he looked after his little leather work satchel.

One rainy May after finishing up the design of a publicity poster for a touring theater company, he'd met two seventies kids, seventeen and sixteen years old. Two reclusive little sprites that loved to eat McDonald's, raucous and stuck together like Siamese twins, they latched onto him after the crowds from the midnight session dispersed. They took him to a karaoke club, where they sang till dawn and finished off one bottle of Rose Red and one of Shaoxing wine. He couldn't sing their songs, they'd never heard of his.

Rain swept sky and earth, barring his exit. The lights of passing night traffic abruptly illuminated the chaos, and in their dazzle arrows of rain flew wildly in all directions, then the light was past. A bunch of black shadows was following him—it was them still, a couple of stupid cats soaked to the skin. They asked him to put them in a cab and take them home. He'd had too much to drink. As he fell dizzily into sleep, the two cats were already stripped naked and huddled up together as wave after wave of rain fell on the awnings, its incessant drumming finding its way inside his dreams.

He woke up to go to the toilet and switched on the overhead lights. The light revealed one kid lying under the bed and one across the doorway, sprawled every which way so he couldn't make out their individual forms. He found some towels and covered them up, then turned off the lights.

In the morning when he woke up, he heard them watching a video and regretted having invited the wolf into his house. In the cold, hard light of day their true nature was revealed. Everything died with the light, and all of it, all of it was utterly hopeless. They scoffed down a packet of his whole-meal wheat crackers and half a bottle of yogurt drink, and he was forced to take them out for a meal.

The seventeen-year-old had heavy black rings around his eyes, eyes like an Indian, giving him a look of languid wantonness mixed with an air of helplessness, tremendously pitiful. Despite the complex savor of his eyes, his skull was empty—he always followed the sixteen-year-old's lead. Never for a moment did they stop eating: They ordered, he paid. A big bag of airy white, pink, and green balls like babies' toys that melted sweetly in the mouth, which they ate up one after another till they were all gone. Meiji Caramel Chews like chewing rubber, M&M's like E.T. ate. A bag of kidney-shaped gummy candy in strange gaudy fruit colors: President Reagan's favorite, said the sixteen-year-old.

Seeing his own interest in the seventeen-year-old, the sixteen-year-old clung tighter to the elder boy. While they played bocce in an amusement park, he threw him the occasional mournful glance, creating an exercise in trigonometry. He followed them from here to there amid the humid crowds, and from there on again to somewhere else. The twilight city was already lighting its lamps, and without knowing why, they were walking on top of the floodgate embankment. The sixteen-year-old averted his gaze, leaving them to it.

The borderline between yin and yang. On one side, the scattered neon lights of the city's back; on the other, the city's inverted reflection. The fetid stench of the water blew across from the deep blackness of the opposite shore, eighteen thousand *li* distant. He led the seventeen-year-old toward the side of inverted reflections and pressed him up against the coarse bricks of the embankment wall to kiss him savagely, just as Jabbar had done to him years before.

The sixteen-year-old reappeared in solitary patrol along the yin-yang border.

When the heavens sprinkled down a fine drizzle the three were reunited.

They lived nearby and he saw them to their building. After they said good-bye the sixteen-year-old turned back. He wanted to give him something, Come up and see. With an air of impish mystery, the sixteen-year-old led him into the room and without turning the light on gave him a slap in the face and began to cry. Don't cry, he hugged the sixteen-year-old, salty kisses mixed with tears. The sixteen-year-

old overpowered him. He asked him for it, and he gave it, fully alert and wakeful, at once joyful and lonely.

When the rain stopped he got up and left, treading slick beams of light on the surface of the water, Bodhisattva incarnate, night the salvation of all beings.

He said good-bye to Zhong Lin, covering his hand with his own. Zhong Lin was silent but his mouth was tender. Give me a call so I can fix it in advance.

Why take the trouble, he'd rather it were a whim of the moment. A week after they parted, he was patiently doing his best not to call him, patiently trying not to think of him. He threw himself into his work, completing at one sitting some illustrations for a children's book that were over two weeks overdue. The double pain of patience and longing filled his life and kept him from impulsive behavior. When his mind was unoccupied he deliberately dwelled on his pain. He dared no capriciousness, but rather hurried to the supermarket, made his purchases, and rushed home, afraid just in case, just in case he might call.

After he installed an answering machine, he risked staying away a little longer to pick up a set of books whose covers he had to design. He came back and listened to the machine, Hello, it's Old Wu, hello, hello, fuck it, even you've got one of these things, *click*, he hung up.

He made up his mind to call him, but first he went and put his head in his photocopy machine. He opened his eyes wide while the glaring light passed over and printed out a face. Out of the black chaos came a white forehead, white nose, and infinitely fine strands of gray-white hair, like some kind of wild mountain spirit. Immediately he went back and printed out a right profile, a left profile, one with the end of his nose pressed flat, one with his eyes shut—all manner of weird and hideous faces—then pinned them to the clothesline as an exhibition. He hesitated two minutes and decided to call.

May I speak to Mr. Zhong. Which Mr. Zhong? Zhong Lin. What department? I don't know. He was transferred somewhere else and

heard the receiver being put down to wait. The busy sound of people's voices, the clatter and clamor of typewriters and documents. He didn't even know what it was that Zhong Lin did. Suddenly he was overwhelmed by cowardice and hung up the phone.

That evening he called his house and Zhong Lin answered right away. They discussed nothing aside from arrangements for the date. He was very busy, only free Saturday. He was taking his girlfriend to a movie in the evening and on Sunday he was going to her place for lunch. It was all true, but it sounded like excuses. Exasperated, Zhong Lin confirmed he'd meet him on Saturday afternoon.

That was still five days away, five days that stretched off into eternity. He recalled to this day a certain X's lips, red and moist all year round like a cherry from a freshly opened can, just asking you to bite it. A whirlwind of pure pleasure shot him up into the Milky Way, exhausting him down to his final drop of strength, but still he didn't come. X couldn't believe it and made a date to meet again a week later on his scheduled day off. He dimly recalled that X worked in a Western restaurant.

He had dedicated all his energy to preparing himself mentally and physically for their next meeting, hoarding his thick, pent-up desire like a hoarding bee. By means of a high degree of efficiency at work, he repressed a yearning that was on the point of explosion, resolving himself to come at all costs. The day of the meeting, X and he began to strip off from the moment they entered the room, until they fell onto the floor beside the bed. He was virtually in shock, a wildfire seemed to ignite all around, corroding the marrow in his bones. Despite this, X still couldn't make him come. In the end it was "five on one": He did it himself.

A long time later, he and X met up again in a bar. When they noticed each other they each gave a dismal laugh, as if by silent accord, and X walked over to tease him, Ha ha, that was so tiring, so tiring. He finally realized something: Desire could not be anticipated. If it consistently turned back his orgasms, he must accept that fate. From then on he passed his days accepting it with propriety and grace—up until the day that he met Zhong Lin.

As one day followed another, the scent of Jabbar returned more and more clearly from all those years before. That damn pine-resin ether stirred up his hormones, churned his loins till they ached, wrapped itself meltingly about him. The night before, he had finished his supper of meticulously prepared cold noodles and was sitting alone, facing a dish of his home-grown cannabis leaves on the coffee table, when that overwhelming scent blew windlessly from every direction through the house, all but overpowering him. He couldn't shake the feeling and rushed out the door in a panic, heading for someplace where there were people.

He went to his elder sister's place. Their apartments were separated only by a concrete bridge—less than a hundred dollars⁵ by cab—but it was two years since he'd visited. His sister was unlike a sister and his brother-in-law unlike a brother-in-law: Instead there was just a television set clamoring away all night long. A long-distance call came in from his old Ma: Shen's sixth son's wedding invitation had arrived at home; she would put in an appearance with Pa to represent the family. How much should they put in the red packet, two thousand was too much, one thousand two hundred,⁶ Ma would pay it in advance. She told him be obedient, Baby Four, don't stay up all night, smoke less cigarettes, do you still only shit once every two days, you should eat more fruit.

On the TV a hit man in sunglasses sang desultorily, his words shooting out one at a time like bullets. When had he first heard about this thing called cool? Not easily moved, like a cold-blooded animal, keeping a cat to relieve your loneliness; a bed, half a lover, a few plants. "Cool" was the name of the song.

He woke at noon to sudden brightness. Shadowless sun filled the universe as he lay flat, looking at his loose-fitting pure-cotton Japanese boxer shorts, puffed up high as if by a golden tower. A colorless world of boundless light: The only color came from the sun passing through a glass of water on the table and refracting onto the top of the wall, now vanishing, now appearing to dance fantastically in red orange yellow green blue indigo violet. He was to meet with his lover, Zhong. Oh Zhong, *my lover*, Zhong.

Then sudden, crushing emotion wrung him out once more—god, desire mutinous on the eve of battle had betrayed him again. He saw his golden tower, proudly aloft a moment before, now collapsing forward in a moment. In an instant, the fertile field of his heart turned to desolation, utter desolation.

Desire with its hundred thousand faces lifted him up again and again, taking him to the uppermost, uppermost point then suddenly peeling the skin from its face, turning beauty to white bones and dropping him to the dusty earth from a height of thousands of feet, repeatedly, over and over again. But this time it was as if he had at last seen something of its true face, as if his eyes had looked unwaveringly upon it. The place of the elephant-trunked god, with its copper and tin mask inlaid all over with tiny turquoise elephant-gods, was bathed in a sheet of white light.

Kama Sutra! That was it.

He'd brought the book back from Nepal, *Kama Sutra: Erotic Figures in Indian Art*. Ingenious sex positions, like yoga exercises, attainable only with inhuman physiology.

Those weird colors. There was cinnabar red, flaming smoke, brilliant like fire; ground mustard yellow. There was peacock blue, deep and distant as a starry sky; palace pink; snake gall green. This dim, close forest held the most fragrant flowers, the most venomous snakes, the most marvelous sex techniques, the briefest lives. That weird, overripe, thoroughly putrescent world of the senses.

He was the only one on earth who knew with utter certainty that the Indians who painted those pictures had not been passively killing off their own dynasty: quite the opposite. He incorporated them into the mixing of his colors and into his designs as if they had always been him.

Kama Sutra! That tropical people with their early-maturing sensuality and deep, keen feelings. He was willing to bet that in each year they lived they saw more complex phenomena than people from cold climates saw in a lifetime. He suddenly knew: If it wasn't King Ayu he was descended from, then it was King Shibi or the Prince of Maha. The former, excelling in battle, butchered several hundred

thousand people before repenting and changing his ways. And the latter—ah, the latter!

King Shibi was watching a little dove chased by a hungry hawk when it flew into his arms, begging to be saved. He said to the hawk, You must not eat this little dove. The hawk replied, If I don't eat fresh meat I will starve; you love and pity him, why do you not love and pity me?

King Shibi took a pair of scales and placed the dove on one side. On the other side he placed an equal weight of flesh, which he cut from his own leg, offering his own flesh in exchange for the dove's life.

King Shibi cut all of the flesh from his thigh and his shoulder but still it did not equal the weight of the dove, so he leapt onto the scales, offering his whole self in compensation.

Immediately the great earth shook, and both hawk and dove disappeared.

He knew that he was the only one in the whole world who believed that whether it was the Prince of Maha who gave up his life to feed the tiger, or King Shibi who cut his own flesh in exchange for the dove, all of these wild, blood-soaked scenes arose from the same source. All of them, through and through, were the obscene acts of his ancestors that were now, a hundred thousand generations later, handed brutally on to him. They were all of them the most obscene people to be found anywhere in earth or heaven.

Nevertheless, he knew that right now what he most ought to do—the only thing to do—was to get up, get dressed, and go to meet Zhong Lin.

At first he hesitated about whether to wear *Polo*, with its barbaric abundance of leather, tobacco, and foliage, or the more neutral Guy Laroche, which gave off a crisp fragrance of citrus that gradually transformed into the strong scent of medicinal herbs. Or Clinique, purely for his own pleasure. Or Calvin Klein's *Obsession*, overlaying pine resin and musk on the sweetness of what was originally a woman's perfume. In the end he didn't wear any of them, taking to the date instead the particular ether of his own body.

They'd arranged to meet at a teahouse that he often went to. As a self-employed worker, at once busy and idle, he expressed his resistance to the urban lifestyle through two negative acts: not buying a car and not wearing a watch. He also had three positive pleasures: the tea ceremony, ceramics appreciation, and cookery, particularly Japanese.

He sat in his usual seat with his back to the window, but all the spectacle and movement outside was reflected in the cold, bright glass of the cabinet that stood opposite. Purple sandware teapots, red earthenware teapots, green earthenware teapots, stone teapots, persimmon teapots, chrysanthemum-petal teapots, tree-burl teapots. Cars sped past and clouds of dust rolled among the teapots, pedestrians walked by: All these comings and goings, all the passing clouds and smoke, were his to watch. It was on top of all this that Zhong Lin appeared.

Wow! In the cold light of day, a quality item remained a quality item, and the sight didn't let him down. Zhong, over here.

Hey Little Tong! Zhong Lin came over and sat down, sizing him up from head to toe and slapping him on the shoulder, Hey Little Tong, how's it going.

The brotherly camaraderie, the smile of the veterans' neighborhood boys, this intimate friendliness between men, were enough, and he broke into a candid smile. After the endless search that had tossed him hither and thither on waves of confusion, what was given to him by Zhong Lin, this man he enjoyed even at a daytime meeting, was amply enough.

His tranquil contentment was soon transmitted to him, and they each relaxed. He calmly prepared the tea; he looked on placidly. Tenderness enfolded them like the intricate shadows of a fine bamboo screen. He offered the tea to him, and their lowered gazes met, just like a respectful spouse bearing the serving tray courteously high.

This summer's flesh-gnawing sun shone straight down, just as it did years ago, after he'd completed the university entrance exams at the end of grade twelve. Suddenly there was nobody in the neighborhood to hang out with. Some had gone away, some were prepar-

ing for exams, and all of a sudden he was the oldest one in the alley. Overnight, Jabbar from the other alley—his most revered elder brother figure since they were little kids—overnight Jabbar did him over and made him a broken-hearted lover.

Jabbar said not a word, but his intense, etherizing gaze turned him weak and carved his fidelity permanently into his bones and heart. It must have been seven or eight days later, maybe two weeks, when that same gaze of Jabbar's was no longer directed to him, but shone out helplessly toward any big, husky boy who showed up around the place. The first time he had a fit of jealousy, Jabbar promised that he loved him and allowed him to enter him; that was his first time to enter a man.

Having done this, Jabbar seemed to think he'd repaid him in full and told him coldly that he loved him, but he wasn't the type he was looking for. He wasn't tall enough, or solid enough, or muscly enough. His knight on a white steed was a soldier or sailor, not him, but he would let him love him.

He was in a daze over Jabbar. Every afternoon they went to the Zai Chun swimming pool and he watched with riveted gaze as Jabbar showed off his body and made electricity with his eyes. Jabbar swam, looking at him with his electric gaze, and frolicked in the water before him as if he were a strand of water-weed or flotsam, unthinking, unfeeling, nonexistent.

He stuck close to Jabbar day after day as though led by an evil spirit and let him insult and trample him, since he thought this was how love worked. This went on until just before the end of summer vacation. The night before Jabbar was to leave for military service, he finally stopped him in the narrow alley. With the melted bones and hopeless face of a satyr exhausted by lust, he begged Jabbar to kiss him.

Jabbar turned his face to the wall and looked down, giving him not even his disdain or contempt. He moved forward to embrace Jabbar, embracing the stiff, cold body and madly trying to hug it back to living warmth, giving everything he had. They weren't afraid

of being seen because that would have been completely and utterly impossible: At that moment everybody had deserted the alleys and gone inside to watch the final episode of *Jing Jing*, where Jing Jing and her mother are reunited.⁷ Listen, the mournful austerity of the opening theme flowed from innumerable doorways and converged to form a great river that reached to his forehead and provided the score for the conclusion of his cruel first love.

Jing Jing, Jing Jing, la-la-la, he hummed the *Jing Jing* theme song.

You've married the wrong husband, Zhong Lin gave him a pat and laughed. He'd messed up the beginning and his face was covered in perturbation.

Now he flashed an easy, carefree smile, *Jing Jing, Jing Jing, la-la-la*, ah, the days of youth. *Jing Jing, Jing Jing, la-la-la*, he hummed it over and over, but no matter how he puzzled, he couldn't remember what came next.

Zhong Lin took over and hummed the next two lines. Running into this old friend so far from home made him jump from his chair in excitement.

How about this one, do you remember this? Zhong Lin sang another tune.

He listened closely, it seemed somehow familiar, Hum a bit more. He hummed some more, I've got it, *The Milky Way*! TTV's first soap opera.

Moved to tears of excitement, the two of them accidentally smashed a tea bowl cover. The noise rang out in the room, causing a momentary commotion. When they calmed down, happy as anything, they began talking about televisions. God, they'd both had TVs from the generation of Tatungs that came with the space-suited Tatung Babydoll gift.⁸ Its sides pulled out like an accordion, and a dark red piece of felt with gold tassels hung down from where it sat on top of the set, certifying it as a genuine Tatung Babydoll.

Listen, what's this? He took pains to hum each note correctly but lost the tune all the same. Zhong Lin listened a moment then joined in, Brave soldiers, *ping*! A steel helmet and two rifles flew onto the

screen: *Combat!* Ah, their old friend Sergeant Saunders, acting alone with determination and courage to lead his troops in annihilating the German army.

Listen to this one, Zhong Lin began humming jauntily. *The Saint!* The saint, Simon Templar, no, not “Templar” with an American accent, but the English “Templah.” *Ding!* And over Roger Moore’s disheveled head shone a halo. After *The Saint* at 11 p.m. on Saturday, the handsome guy went on to the city at the bottom of the sea in the James Bond movie. He had to punch and kick and go to bed with the Russian female spy, poor guy, not a moment’s rest. Ah, he’s gotten old too, with thinning hair and sagging skin.

What about this one, he hummed a phrase for ages, but still Zhong Lin couldn’t get what it was, Hell it’s Apple Soda. Zhong Lin hummed it from the beginning, Oh—right. In summer the room was an oven, and at each critical moment in the two o’clock Saturday show it’d cut and swish-swish-swish there’d spin out a bottle of Apple Soda with ice-cold water running down—it drove you nuts. And after that it was always King Bee Soap, with that indolent female cicada voice chirping out—and he and Zhong Lin sang together in the same voice: Kiiiing Beee Soooap.

The whole damn era was with them again. So it turned out that the two old kids of the fifties, adrift under the flaming sun of the present, shared all of this in common.

Monday demon-fighting *Golden Tiger*, Tuesday *Mission Impossible*, Wednesday it was the telepathic spies, with the fountain in Zurich spraying water high in the air at the start of the show. In *Leave It to Beaver* on Thursday there was a pretty black secretary. And the little hero, Beaver, drove you mad with jealousy of that enlightened Ma and Pa of his who understood how to sit down and communicate. Heard that the real-life Beaver was killed in the Vietnam War—No he wasn’t, it was Johnny Yuma from *The Rebel* that was killed.

Get Smart at dusk, five-thirty Fridays—weird how that downright homely 99 was the spitting image of Popeye the Sailor Man’s girlfriend Olive Oyl. Hah—all the best shows were on Friday, *Combat!* was Friday. D’you remember *Art World Intrigue*, the antique-store owner was always getting mixed up in murder cases or battles over

rare treasures. Yeah, right, what about *Garrison's Gorillas*, that old gang of guys—The Warden, Actor the con-man, the cat-burglar, Chief brandishing his switchblade, and Casino with his lantern jaw and specialty of opening safety deposit boxes, hah, the enchanting Warden had a cleft chin exactly like Kirk Douglas!

They chatted away an eternity, till the stars fell to the bottom of the sea and the river's source was overwhelmed by rain. It was time to leave; Zhong Lin still had to take his girlfriend to the seventeenth movie. Suddenly Zhong Lin was seized with an impulse: He wouldn't go.

He was sipping tea when he sensed the sudden stirring of an ominous wind and all but spilled his tea. His heart somersaulted wildly several times, then gradually fell still.

When the rush of blood retreated from his head, Zhong Lin, too, realized it couldn't really work.

The opportunity was fleeting. Both were keenly aware that if they didn't end up in bed today it was unlikely ever again to happen between them in this life.

It made one a little regretful, a little sad.

At the same time, they both knew that this was a good beginning for a long and intimate friendship. That ought to be a cause for celebration, yet in spite of that, it was like this.

Which side do you prefer? he asked, laughing, unafraid to break the taboo.

Zhong Lin thought for quite a while. With my girlfriend it's more comfortable, but this side's more exciting. Every day going to work, coming home from work; it all gets pretty boring, and me and my girlfriend are like some old married couple, no new tricks. Zhong Lin laughed, embarrassed, Ah, I don't know.

He knew that since he'd been able to refuse desire the first time, he'd be able to do it the second time, the third time, the nth time. The day of the nth time he could die and ascend to heaven. Would that be cause for happiness? For sadness? He didn't know.

Summer this year truly was the summer of the year he was fifteen.

NOTES

1. Chi Tawei, “Zai huangyanshang zhizao tongxinglian shengyin” (Creating a homosexual voice in the wasteland),” in *Wan’an Babilun* (Goodnight Babylon), (Taipei: Tansuo, 1998), 155–168.

2. Jabbar’s nickname (Jia Ba) is a reference to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, an NBA star popular in Taiwan in the time the story is set. *Trans.*, with thanks to *Chi Tawei*.

3. Words in English in the original texts are reproduced in italics in this and the other stories.

4. “Veterans’ neighborhood” refers to distinct precincts in Taiwan’s cities where the families of the rank-and-file Kuomintang army established homes after the KMT’s flight to Taiwan in 1949. These precincts were well defined and somewhat marked off socially and culturally from other areas by the mainland Chinese provenance of their inhabitants. Many of the neighborhoods resembled makeshift shantytowns; the KMT government never provided money to fund standard housing for its rank-and-file veterans, because the official KMT policy until the 1990s was to retake the mainland rather than remain in Taiwan. Recently, many of the old veterans’ neighborhoods have been razed and their inhabitants provided with more standard housing. *Trans.*

5. NT\$100 is about US\$3. *Trans.*

6. NT\$2,000 is about US\$60. *Trans.*

7. Jing Jing, star of the eponymous 1970s TV animation series, is coincidentally also the name of Taiwan’s first dedicated gay and lesbian bookstore, conventionally transliterated “Gin Gin’s.”

8. The local Tatung Company was one of the main suppliers of electronic goods to Taiwan’s domestic market in the 1960s and 1970s. This anecdote refers to the free gift of a plastic doll that came along with Tatung televisions in this period, which people often arranged atop the television set. *Trans.*, with thanks to *Chi Tawei*.

PLATONIC HAIR



QIU MIAOJIN

This is the first overtly lesbian-themed story by Qiu Miaojin (1969–1995), a writer who, apart from the accolades she won from Taiwan’s literary establishment, is also celebrated in local lesbian subcultures as the island’s best-known lesbian author. Qiu’s most influential works are her novels, *The Crocodile’s Journal* (1994) and the semiautobiographical *Montmartre Testament* (published posthumously in 1996), both now lesbian classics. *The Crocodile’s Journal* won the *China Times* Honorary Novel Prize for Qiu posthumously, following her suicide in Paris at just twenty-six. In an interesting development since the mid-1990s, La-zi, the name of the lesbian protagonist of *The Crocodile’s Journal*, has become a ubiquitous code word for lesbian identity in Taiwan’s *nütongzhi* Internet cultures.

Qiu’s thematic exploration of “T-po” lesbian relations (comparable to, but not identical with “butch-femme” relations) has occasioned some debate among Taiwan’s feminist and lesbian cultural critics. Liou Liang-ya writes, “[Qiu’s] fiction reflects the loneliness and desolation of [one who had] not

yet been baptized in feminism and the *tongzhi* movement," yet in the same article she also argues that "*The Crocodile's Journal* and ... 'Platonic Hair' highlight the fact that T-po are what Judith Butler calls performative, rather than being expressive of an essence."¹ Thus, for Liou, Qiu's representations of T-po relationships at once draw upon entrenched, conservative ideologies of masculinity and femininity and destabilize those ideologies.

This story originally appeared in the *Independence Evening Post* (1990) and was then collected in Qiu's first book of short stories, *The Revelry of Ghosts*, published in 1991. Playing with the reader's interpretation of the narrator's gender, this story once again explores the lesbian gender categories of "T" and po. Although this story was published early compared to other examples of writing from this generation (for example Chen, Chi, and Hong, this volume), its style makes clear Qiu's status as one of the "new-generation" authors born in the late 1960s and early 1970s: The setting is a kind of generic contemporary city, and most of the action takes place in locales inhabited by the young urban middle class, such as cafés, bars, and rented apartments distant from family connections. This story is marked by the emotional intensity and suggestions of the surreal and nightmarish that are characteristic of Qiu's writing.



"Your hair's so long!"

Han parted my hair from my forehead and let it drop onto the pillow on either side of my head. Both our pillow covers were plain purple, and facing each other in the corners of these matching squares of purple were two black, embroidered birds, hers in the upper right hand corner, mine in the upper left. The two black birds gazed fixedly at each other. She loved purple; I loved black. I often said that sleeping here every night I felt I'd be drowned by her purple, to which she'd reply that it was my black that unreasonably confined her gaze. Even the rug on the floor that we used as a bed was purple. The only black thing was the door, forcibly painted by me.

"Your hair's much longer than mine is!" I absently stroked her fringe with my left hand, as my right, cradling her head, moved back and forth amid the softness of her long tresses.

"But you're a man!" She blinked at me, assuming an expression of protest.

"Can't men have long hair?" I protested back at her.

"No. Men aren't allowed to."

"But long hair is so beautiful, don't you love your own hair?"

"If you had long hair, too, you'd stop loving mine. And what's more, before long someone else who loves long hair would fall in love with you. I might as well just cut my hair off right now and become the person who falls in love with your long hair. How about that?" Her eyes stared resolutely at me and her voice trembled slightly, so weak it almost betrayed the hoarse breaking of tears. At times like this she would affect a clumsy, bullying tone, as though to make up for her all too obvious weakness.

"Don't, you mustn't cut your hair, you're a woman! I've grown used to your beauty with long hair. I've come to depend on my love for it, and that dependent love has become a patch of rich, fertile soil in my heart. To cut out that love would be too agonizing!"

Only after hearing my pleas did she smile the smile of the victor. She calmly embraced me and leaned against my shoulder, then closed her eyes, leaving me to stare intently at her face. I resisted the desire to kiss her gently closed eyelashes and faced another endless night of contentment and torture.

She dedicates herself to tormenting me. I take a long drag on my cigarette, shut my eyes and recall the dialogue in that scene, her protests, her bullying, and the delicate alterations to her expression in the moment of victory. These words and her face fill my memory to bursting—they pour out of it, my head like a bag with a hole in the bottom. I need only lie down on that purple rug for them to begin climbing out along my hair as the strands grow longer with each passing moment, each memory competing with the others for first place.

They drop down in all directions about me, then they push and shove and struggle with each other and roll into all corners of the room. By the time I woke up on the first day this happened, it was

already impossible to find my way across the floor without treading on her face. I burst out in a laugh of amazement: "How can you torment me so?" Kneeling down in tears, I gathered one by one into a drawer the translucent faces that covered the floor like ball bearings.

Right now I'm wearing a black leather jacket, leather pants, and sunglasses and standing under the eaves of a derelict single-storied house. Opposite is "her" place. This is a narrow, dank alley where two rows of mean little houses flourish between a pair of tall tower blocks. Standing under the eaves on this side, if I extend my arm I can just about touch the eaves on the other side.

At the moment I'd calculated, the man with the red jacket brings "her" back. He then lowers his head and marches away from the mouth of the alley as though he detested it. I slip quickly over to the alley's other side and stub out my cigarette on the wall, dropping it onto the pile of butts in the gutter.

(Han: I haven't written a single word for the past five years. Each time I sit down at my desk and pick up a pen, as soon as the tip of the pen meets the paper I find myself uncontrollably drawing you. Your thick, fragrant, sleek, long hair; your cleanly drawn eyebrows; your bright eyes; your high-bridged, straight nose; your glistening lips. My hand is like my hair: with the strong psychic force of my longing it's taken on mysterious new functions.

How you used to wish I'd write something good. Before you met me I'd written a pile of best-selling romances, using this talent to support myself for ten years after my graduation. But I promised you I would stop using words as a moneymaking tool. You said better you should keep me and let me concentrate on my writing, so sure were you in your belief that I could become a respected writer.)

As I think of this, my long hair stirs quietly to life. The green lichens on the wall begin to creep like spiders in the shadows of the ink-blue dusk. I gather up my hair, afraid it will be infected with the lichens' restlessness.

Soon "she" appears, no longer dressed in the white uniform of a moment before but wearing a tight, scoop-necked purple evening dress covered in innumerable sequins. From "her" bag, made of a

mesh of silver balls, “she” takes out a pair of pink sunglasses, then hurries from the alley. I stand on this side watching “her” retreating silhouette. “Her” hair, gathered up in a ponytail, has shaken itself out into a cloud, and it falls and swishes over naked shoulders. Suddenly my eyes are as blind as if they had been stabbed with a sword, and in my head there bursts a great flash of light like electricity —

“You’ve written a stack of romance novels, but do you really know anything about the city’s nightly traffic in desire?”

Seated in front of the bright window of his tenth-story office, my boss, K, spun around in his high-backed chair and challenged me to respond to his interrogation.

“I guess it’s pretty much how I write it in the romances,” I replied nonchalantly.

“Hmph, you youngsters imagine the world like a kids’ cartoon. Huh! If a person reaches forty and still uses the word ‘love’ to describe what happens between men and women in this world, he’s either an idiot or a genius!” With that he threw his feet smugly up onto his marble desk.

“Then why publish all these romance novels?” I felt cheated.

“Because the folks with the time and the cash to spend on books are all under forty! I think of their money with ‘love,’ then use their money to pay you guys to create ‘love’!”

“How do people *over* forty think about men and women?”

“Why not take some cash and buy someone, and see for yourself? I’ll pay you to write about your love experiment!”

K scratched the stubble on his jaw with the long, pointed nail of his pinkie. The self-satisfied tilt of his chin and the sideways glint of his eye seemed to measure up how much I was worth. I knew his money could buy a romance writer, but I didn’t believe it could buy love. So I had no objection to taking his cash to get myself a love toy. Moreover, I decided that the more shocking and the more costly it was, the better.

"Have you got a Marlboro? Give me one?" The woman in the purple vest said to the red-haired woman by her side, about ten years her senior.

"Out of cigarettes, are you? If you want a smoke, go bum one from a guy!" The red-haired woman blew a careless smoke ring at her.

"What's the matter? Can't even spare a cigarette?"

"Serves you right! Who told you to be so picky—those two old geezers who asked your price weren't good enough for you, no, you have to wait for a young guy—and now you're left with not even a cigarette to smoke!"

"At least I've still got my capital! Unlike you—so desperate you throw yourself at anything that moves!"

"You're kidding me—you think youth is capital? When you strip off, isn't it all the same two bits of meat and a hole? That face of yours could only take in a rank amateur. When men come here to buy happiness, what they want is true skill, and I know all your little tricks."

"Yeah, right! And before they can take advantage of that true skill of yours they have to stick a bag over your ugly face. I've got more than one guy coming after me each night—why shouldn't I be a bit picky?"

"Princess, don't think that just because you've done a few days' study you're some kind of a goddess. Once you've been in this line of work, no matter how you dress it up, all you're left with is one messed-up body!"

With this, the red-haired woman threw her half-smoked cigarette onto the wet sidewalk and ground it out thoroughly with her heel, then walked haughtily away.

I was driving K's Cadillac and had stopped at the corner of M Street and W Street. I'd wound down the black-tinted window and now sat in the car, listening in on the two women's conversation.

Driving into this district you were immediately engulfed by a stream of luxury cars. On both sides of the road under the shops' awnings crowded a mass of people, each sniffing out the scent of his

prey, while the fantastic light of the neon signs flashed out its colorful welcome to the hunters. Women with their faces caked in powder and rouge emerged from the stream of women flowing down the street. Stationing themselves at particular spots along M Street, they were like the street's own living fossils.

Under my shades my eyes surveyed the fossil lineup. The purple vest stood out immediately: She seemed unwilling to take up a position in any particular spot. My car trailed her down the length of the street.

She agreed quickly to the contract and flashed me an ID card on which was written in careless script the name Wang Xiujuan. Just as I was wondering what could have made her agree to be part of this absurd experiment, she reached out from her seat opposite me in the café booth and took off my sunglasses.

"With a woman like me, you've got nothing to hide," she said playfully. "So you want to spend your money to buy an imitation of a man's experience of love? Starting from now, we've both got to become conscientious actors."

Standing, she produced from her handbag a black shirt, which she now put on, carefully fastening its buttons one by one until the purple vest was completely obscured. Seeing her expression of concentration as she fastened the buttons, I couldn't help but feel a certain curiosity about this twenty-year-old girl. She composed her face into a placid expression and said with a shy laugh, "For the next six months just call me Han-Han."

I took Han-Han home that night. I live in a little concrete room on top of a four-storied apartment block, with the toilet outside by the cooling tower. Aside from my room, the whole rooftop is taken up with a huge pile of junk. When I opened the wooden door that leads to the roof, she let out a shriek of joy and rushed to the junk heap, squatted down, and began sorting through it like a real professional. Soon she'd unearthed a rectangular piece of rotten wood, a little copper statue with flaking lacquer, and a broken, round-bellied coffee

mug. She leapt excitedly over to where I stood and thrust these objects into my arms, saying, "There! These are for you as a welcome gift. Here's to our eternal love!"

I opened a window onto the night sky, took a deep breath of the still, fragrant midnight air, and keeping my back to her, lit a cigarette. My hands were trembling. Even though I must have been more than ten years older than this girl, with her around I somehow felt less at home than she appeared to be in my own room. You might say I lacked any sense of security.

I began to regret having been taken in by K's prank. It was as though I'd stepped outside the safety lines that had delimited my existence since birth, and the alarm bells had started ringing. I finally understood: The wild fantasies that passed for sex scenes in my novels were really no more than landscape pictures that I painted on the walls of my closed-up room. If I wanted to walk into the landscape, I had first to leave that room.

In the first hour we said nothing. She was rushing back and forth between the bedroom and the bathroom arranging her clothes, cosmetics, shower things, and a few leisure magazines, all of which she'd brought with her in a big canvas bag. As she knelt on the yellow-and-blue-checked linoleum floor considering the question of how best to organize her things, her face wore the same expression of concentration I'd noticed earlier. It was like a dove that flies over to rest on your hand to peck at birdseed, making you afraid to move lest it take fright. That expression suited her age, but it made a startling contrast with her professional image.

The surer I was that she moved about under my gaze, in my space, as relaxed as a fish swimming in water, the more afraid I became of her. She, a streetwalker—moreover, a woman who had gladly accepted her part in this ridiculous game—was used to what I considered a life of filth, a life that produced a nameless terror in my heart. She left me at a loss as to what it could possibly be that she meant to do.

"Han-Han, why did you agree to this?" My senses returned to me somewhat. I had taken K's money, and the girl had come home with

me; now all I could do was take a deep breath and go on with the charade as best I could.

"Wouldn't it be easiest to think I did it for the money?" She shot me a sly look from where she knelt scrubbing the floor.

"It can't be that simple. What you'll get from me is nothing to what you'd earn working."

"Hey! In the six months I live with you, I can still go out and work at night!"

"Aha! In that case you get the money *plus* a free hotel—no wonder you agreed."

"Wrong. I've got my own place ten times more comfortable than this. After my second year in the trade I bought myself a bed-sit. No, the main reason I came here is that I enjoy taking risks. I like making love with completely different people."

"*Making love*? Completely different people? Including people like me?"

I almost screamed when she uttered those two words. In the fanciful romances I wrote, regardless of the age of the male and female characters, as long as they were human, then any combination of two of them together invariably resulted in unrestrained passion and wildly imaginative "sex." Despite this, when the person here in front of me used the words "making love" as freely I did in my novels, she broke my taboos so completely that I felt I'd stumbled on a beehive in a dark crevice: My fingers were stung all over, and hot pain overwhelmed me.

"Sure! I'll probably never get to meet another customer like you. My clients usually conform to a handful of specific types, like low-down old men, poor impotent guys who like to make a show of it, and a few rotten old whore sisters. Being with you will be something different—plus, I'll get to teach this writer how to 'make love.'"

She asked me if I wanted to take a shower with her, as casually as if she was asking me whether I wanted to eat with her. When I hastened to wave my hand energetically in refusal, she gave a strange laugh, as if she'd seen through to the turmoil in my heart and wanted deliberately to tease me.

I was surprised at myself for not despising her casual approach to physical intimacy. This wasn't because I aspired to some Euro-American notion of "sexual liberation." Rather it was because those words sounded utterly natural and elegant when she spoke them, while had another person spoken them they would have given off the stench of filth.

After her shower she emerged wearing a filmy purple negligée. I caught fleeting glimpses of her bra and underpants underneath, and the curves of her body showed up as clean as those of a statue. This was the first time I'd ever been so close to a young woman's body, and though I shouldn't have, I felt slightly excited. It was just like the feeling I'd had when I'd looked at myself naked in the mirror for the first time.

"According to the rules of the contract, you are now my man, and like it or not you've got to look like my kind of man. The first thing we've got to do is cut that pretty hair of yours."

Picking up some scissors, she ordered me to sit down in front of the big floor-length mirror. First she chopped off the length of my hair in one snip, leaving hair reaching just to the nape of my neck. Then she carefully shaped the remaining hair a pinch at a time. She moved around me, entranced by the pleasure of her activity, examining me from different angles, yet seemingly quite forgetful of my existence.

First she trimmed the ends of my hair at the back into a perfect crescent, and then, after cutting two pointed sideburns in front of my ears, she appeared to wake up again. With a cry of delight she hugged my head and impulsively kissed me on the forehead, shouting, "My man has appeared!" I watched in amazement as she did all this, until, noticing, she let go of me in embarrassment.

The moment "she" leaves the alley I gather my thick, waist-length hair at the front and hold it tight in my left fist, afraid it might fly off strand by strand after "her."

That first time at the intersection of M and W Streets, it was my hair that first noticed "her." The instant my eyes lit on "her," the mil-

lion strands of my hair simultaneously moved around and shot straight out in front of me like fine black arrows. My head was just about ripped right off, making me howl in pain, and I was pulled bodily along for several paces while passersby gathered around in astonishment. Ecstasy burst in the depths of my heart. I knew what had happened: I had found her at last.

Over on the main road, a Volvo slows to a halt at the curb. A man in a red shirt stands by the car, chewing betelnut, and gestures for “her” to hurry. As “she” rushes over in “her” high-heeled shoes the sequins on “her” purple evening dress are like mirrors catching light in the dark night. The heel of “her” shoe breaks, “her” body twists, and “she” falls to the ground.

The fact that I am about twenty meters away from “her” aside, I have absolutely no desire to go over to help “her” up. Mechanically, I play with the lighter in my hand, pressing down the red tab on top. I remember the time she wore that cream-colored nightdress that reached only to the top of her thighs and sat on the bed with her head bowed, hugging herself and saying, “Oh, I’m so frightened!” Then, I stood coldly off at a distance, like a camera filming an interview. Han, I didn’t dare go to you: I was so frightened.

I open the black wooden door to my room and the purple of the four walls wells up and swallows me. Every time I come home I want to stand in the dark and rub my hands and cheeks over the walls’ particles of purple. Han never taught me how to make love with her, only how to do it with the walls.

In the dark, I start up my computer and the screen opens to a journal running from the 20th of October to the 21st of April. Inside it are all the letters we wrote each other, as well as a detailed history that we took turns typing on the computer. The characters on the screen jump faster and faster until they look like a swarm of out-of-control green ants, constantly changing their battle array, invading the soft part of my brain —

March 21. We still haven’t made love (day 152). Intimacy rating: 90. Han.

“People are like a collection of pearls. Until someone threads

them together on a string, the collection has no shape or hierarchy," Han said.

"So you believe there's no necessary system to them?"

"Right. It's not like arranging building blocks."

"But I can't seem to forget about the system that tells you which building block ought to go with which other building block!"

"So you can't make love with me, even though you really want to?"

"Mm—I'd be punished!"

"Like a curse?"

"Yes, like a curse!"

In the afternoons I worked as an editor at a publishing company, coming home in the evening to write. Each night I'd pick Han up in front of a bar on M Street at 2 A.M. She didn't begin work until eight in the evening. Sometimes her "company" set up clients for her and sent a car around to collect her; other times she went it alone, picking customers up off the street in the busy part of town.

Each night she'd sit down on the bed and put on her makeup and her seductive clothes and jewelry; then, with an apologetic look in her eyes, she'd say good-bye to me. She always leaned in the doorway a few moments staring at me—I think she hoped I'd go over and give her a hug and some moral support. But I'd just put on a false smile and say, "Have a good time at work." As my eyes followed her retreating form, I was careful to remind myself, "I and she are two separate people; I write my novels, and she works as a prostitute. It's that simple." Yet for no reason at all there always remained a little sadness.

Every night after two, Han-Han and I spent time alone together, chatting idly or driving out on midnight trips to bars to drink and dance. Or else we'd just go home to listen to music, make coffee, and cook. She'd tell me about goings-on in the circles she moved in, and I'd relate to her stories from my writing. I also taught her how to read good fiction.

She took away the clothes I used to wear and bought me some men's suits of the type she preferred, as well as cuff links and after-shave and such. She ruled that in her presence I had to dress according to the image she liked, and she lost no opportunity to tease me sexually.

Despite all this, we each felt it would be impossible to love the other. I believed that although I might like her as a person, I could not feel love or desire for a woman. She felt that while she needed someone she could trust to hold her and to be physically intimate with her, she was nevertheless incapable of falling in love.

I was parked at the entrance to the bar called The Zither, and I'd already waited an unusually long time. Then I saw the black glass automatic door slide open, and out came two men wearing lewd expressions and supporting Han between them by an arm each. Han was dead drunk. Now Han was a great drinker, and when she went out with clients she always kept a clear head. I often laughingly accused her of "committing crimes in cold blood"—and I'd never once seen her drunk. Seeing her that way now, I cared for her so much I felt it would melt my heart away.

Taking advantage of her drunken daze, one of the johns grabbed at her crotch with his free hand while the other pushed his head into her breasts as he walked, and bit her nipple ferociously through her dress.

I felt that my head would explode. I rushed toward them as if in a trance, and using all my strength I managed to separate her from the johns. I roared that Han was already bought for the night, and one of them hit me in the face. When Han heard the sound of his fist on my face, she burst into loud sobs and took out a wad of cash from her purse, then stuffed it into one of the johns' hands. Clutching my hand tight she said, "Take me home."

Back at home Han threw up all over both of us, covering us in vomit, yet all the while she kept up a continuous, excited stream of drunken babble. I removed the suit and shirt that I'd worn for her and wet my head to soften my hair, which was combed hard with gel. Then I prepared to give us both a bath.

As I helped her out of each piece of her clothing, I was quite sure

that I had no need to fear impure thoughts and that I would quite naturally be able to accomplish the task of bathing her. After all, only a man's body could excite me, and this was merely a woman.

But when she and I sat facing each other naked in the cramped, narrow bathroom, I found my heart racing so hard that my face blushed bright red, and gradually I became aware of a tight, cramped feeling between my legs. Guilt made me want to drop her then and there and leap from the room. In my panic I found myself detesting her: I loathed her too-beautiful body, I loathed how she had sexually teased me before now. So I finished hastily, splashing us with plain water and dispensing with the soap, deciding that this was bath enough.

Even though she was so drunk she couldn't stand up, she remained sensitive to my embarrassment and panic, and as she gazed at me she let out a hysterical laugh. In the confusion of that moment I was suddenly aware of something: This girl's body and feelings had come to be of significance to me. The realization produced a kind of cloying joy in my heart. My sense of the combined significance of her body and her feelings grew stronger and stronger: With all the love experiences of my more than thirty years of life, I had never known such perfect balance.

Her body, still reeking of alcohol, was like a mysterious symbol that opened a strange new world to me.

When my head cleared I realized that her whole body was radiating heat, her forehead and cheeks as hot as a kettle. I wrapped her in the rug on the floor, all of a sudden unreasonably afraid that she might die at any moment. I burst into helpless tears.

"What're you crying about?"

"I don't know, I just feel like crying. It's as though you're about to die."

"Silly, how could I possibly die so easily?"

"That's not all it is. I feel as if my life has a hole in it and my things are pouring out and your things are pouring in. I can't tell whose are whose."

"Then don't bother separating them! Thirty years old, and still you make your life such a fuss!"

Weakly, Han-Han lifted her hand, and with the lightest of touches she wiped away my tears. Then she stroked the hair on my forehead and by my ears, back and forth, her hand like a little boat floating in a light breeze. I had done the same thing myself for others in the past, but I'd never thought that these gentle touches could harbor such a power of tenderness. Suddenly I understood that this was "femininity."

Only with this new consciousness of the thing called "femininity" did I truly understand what it was that had made me cry so helplessly. It was that I was "female," too!

I was very seldom aware of my own gender. When she had spoken of "making love" and invited me to shower with her, my shock had been the result of the view that "one shouldn't have sex without love." Even when she'd cut my hair short and gotten me to wear suits and aftershave, I had approached the matter with the professional attitude of "thoroughly experiencing masculinity," remaining insensitive to the question of my own gender.

I had never given much thought to gender difference, and even less to my own femininity or masculinity. In my eyes, I and others belonged simply to the single category of "people." As for people's relations with each other—love, sex, marriage—I took it for granted that these things just happened naturally, and that it was the same for me. Only now did I discover that hidden beneath that "naturalness" were prohibitions I found quite intolerable.

I was now thirty-six, and had had three boyfriends, with two of whom I'd had sexual relations. Since the time of my first love at twenty, I'd been writing romances. Now there was no more love in my life, and I knew I wouldn't get married. The task for me for what remained of my life was to find a suitable sexual partner and pass the remaining years in which I'd still have sexual needs, and after that my relations with others would come to an end.

So smooth and slippery were my relations with other people that now, all in a flash, I slipped clear off the slide.

"You won't make me go to the hospital, will you?" Han looked at me with pleading eyes.

"No, you must certainly go to the hospital!" A harsh terror gath-

ered at the bottom of my heart, and I had a vague premonition that something was about to happen.

"I was at the hospital only today—it was so awful, so frightening—I beg you, don't make me go back to be punished again!" She sobbed out loud as if there were some cruel thing tearing at her heart. Turning to lean her body against me, she took my hand in both of hers and laid it against her cheek.

"Why did you go to the hospital?"

"I went to get rid of a baby that I didn't know who the father was... It's all my own fault, I should've been more careful. The first time I let a man come inside me, when I was fifteen, was when I had to get rid of my first child. It was a terrible time. I didn't love the man at all, but I loved the baby too much. Since then I've understood two things about my life: One, that sex is very important to me, and two, that I'll never have children."

She stopped sobbing, her tears welling up silently.

During all the time we'd been together, we'd always respected each other's life. From those first days when we were so awkward together up till our present easy companionship, we'd been like two people playing opposite each other in a fully scripted play, neither of us touching the spirit of the other.

Now I no longer felt that she was simply an old hand skilled in the ways of the world, or a free individual who knew how to enjoy liberating herself. I became aware for the first time of the power of a certain tender, feminine beauty that emanated from her, a power that attracted and gathered the hitherto slumbering and dispersed particles of masculinity within me and told me that I must become strong and protect her.

"I think maybe I love you a little...", she laughed to me innocently.

"You're only twenty three, you don't understand love." I closed the door in a panic, shutting her on the other side.

"It's you that doesn't understand how to love a woman. No—is it that you don't dare?" I was silent for a long time.

"What's to be done. We'll both be thrown down to hell!"

Finally I laid down my weapons and surrendered, burying my head in her chest and revealing my terror to her in choking sobs. After that, the two of us gazed at each other for a long time. A sweet smile appeared on her face and she stroked my head as if to say, "Everything will be all right." With that she went, satisfied, to sleep.

"She" gets into the Volvo in her purple dress. Quickly I gather my hair on top of my head and secure it under a hat, then hail a cab and get it to tail the Volvo. "She" goes into The Zither, and as the door opens, a fat middle-aged man appears, smiling, to take her hand. I put on a tie under my black leather jacket, fix my sideburns in place with hair gel, and walk into the bar.

I sit at a table by a pillar in the corner, drinking brandy on my own. Women wearing high-split *qipaos* and men with eyes lit with the spark of desire move around me.² I can't tell where one person ends and the next begins. The deafening music makes my tears wander about on my face, and the many bright colors of people's clothes pile up on top of each other and get confused together so that I can't find purple anywhere.

Mirrors cover the four walls. Notes of music fly around the mirrors, and every color but purple glitters and glows in them. All I want is to push all this aside and let my hair out, allowing each strand free to go in search of her.

(Han: It sounds awful but no matter what I do I can't stop searching for you. What I'll do if I find you, even I don't know. I can't even find in my memory whether you're dead or you just went to live somewhere else. All this is like a riddle to me, and my life is victim to the riddle's invasion.

So I have to search compulsively for you, just as before I met you I compulsively wrote romances. It makes no difference—after all, isn't living just a matter of compulsive expenditure? Only by continuing to search am I alive.)

A screen is lowered on one wall. In the darkness the images form into a sex scene between a man and a woman. A faceless man's erect

penis penetrates the body of a woman whose face shows excitement, and my face is washed with tears.

Despite the ludicrous script penned by this third-rate writer, the two of us had become wrapped up in a life that was like a colorful, intoxicating landscape. I truly had walked into that familiar wall painting, but it felt completely different from my real life. All the paths were winding. I felt terror and joy at the same time, and it was Han who led me, but she skipped and jumped like a little kid out on an excursion.

From the time I first felt that dependent love for her, everything became terribly painful. Each evening after work I exercised the full strength of my will trying to force myself to wait at the office till after eight. But I was always defeated at the critical moment and found myself racing desperately home like a dog after its master.

More and more afraid to let me see her in her seductive clothes, she forbade me to return before she left, but still I sped home to see her. It took a hundred times more effort than before for me to pull my mouth into a smile and say, "Have a good time at work." In that scene, neither of us dared walk over and touch the other; it was as though some grim barrier stood between us. She even kept her back to me, rushing out after finishing her makeup, without so much as turning her head to look at me.

We went through this tragic parting night after night, never growing used to it. It was as if she was returning alone to the real world and leaving me by myself in the painted forest. I didn't detest her at all for her image as a prostitute or for the work she did. It was simply that when she transformed herself from my delicate little lover into an intrepid woman of the world, I felt a despair that was like plunging into a bottomless abyss. Between us stood a wall of stone: all the world's men. Reflecting that any man in the street was free to touch her body and that I alone could not, all I could do was drink hard liquor and cease to think.

In the winter night I began my vigil at twelve, smoking alone in the car for two hours. At last, now dressed in a purple shirt and

white jeans, her long hair spread over her back, her face washed clean of cosmetics and lit by a childlike smile, she appeared at the door.

I went to greet her, yearning despondently to bite down hard on her shoulder. She laughed innocently back at me as if to say that she wished to bite my shoulder, too, and that made me laugh as well. I took her hands and rubbed them hard from her palms to the backs of her hands, then from her thumbs to the tips of her little fingers. Only when her hands had lost their iciness and become warm did I take them and place them in the pockets of my big overcoat.

To be a woman who loves another woman is to be sharply, heart-piercingly humbled. The humiliation of not knowing what I could possibly give her shadowed my every move. Truly the only thing I could do for her was rub her icy hands.

"You don't blame me, do you?" Han had finished her shower and changed into a cream-colored nightdress with a purple koala drawing on the chest. She hugged a pillow and sat kneeling on the rug.

"Blame you for what? There's so much!" I pulled a face.

"How dare you! What do you mean, there's so much?" She feigned girlish anger, lying down with her back to me.

"Okay, okay. Good girl, turn around. Do you mean about your work?" I knelt beside her and brought my face to hers, taking advantage of her closed eyes to give her forehead a swift kiss. She opened her eyes wide and stared at me as though accusing me of breaking the rules, then pushed me away and sat up.

"You ought to know that I won't stop working for anyone. I'm not like those other girls who do it out of helplessness, sleeping with men every day and living their lives in tears. I believe I matured early. This is my own choice: This is the life I prefer.

"My dad is a university professor. He always respected me and let me make all my decisions for myself. The year I graduated from high school, I told him that I liked making love with men and that I liked making lots of money and living amid the nightlife of the city, so I had decided to take this path. He nodded his head and asked me to move out of home and cut my ties with him, and then he exhorted me over and over to be careful . . . Do you understand?"

Her gaze was unrelenting. Although I had sensed early on that she had a side that was intractable as rock, this revelation still left me with an odd feeling of horror.

"But it's so painful—you only need men's bodies and you don't want mine, you won't even let me touch you!"

"I understand, I truly do understand your torment. But in the whole world you're the one person I can love. I don't care that you're a woman. The point is that aside from you, I can have sexual relations with anybody, but you're quite different. Only if I love you with a hundred percent spiritual love can the two of us become one."

"So I have to put up with it?"

"Poor thing! Lie down and fantasize like I do—enjoy the feeling of my abuse."

Bending her legs to one side, she suddenly moved over and sat embracing me tightly, her hands clasped behind my neck.

"You fantasize about making love with me?"

The moment she touched me and I felt the special softness of her familiar body, an electric current ran through my whole frame. It was at once a current of excitement and a current of punishment.

"I want to so much! But I naturally imagine making love with a man—yet I can tell that the man is you."

She let go of me and lay down, covering herself with the quilt. It was as though the plug had been pulled out, leaving me in the darkness with my ardent need for her.

After switching off the light, I curled up by the wall as far away from her as possible, silently smoking and thinking of the time when I had long hair. I, too, was once young like Han. Maybe I hadn't even been aware that my long hair exerted an attractive force like hers. Perhaps it was because I myself had possessed the feminine beauty I now drew from Han's body that I'd attracted those three men into my life, two of whom I'd let enter my body.

I let out a long breath; the moon illuminated a fine thread of smoke. Gathering my courage I recalled the sensation of being penetrated by a man. It was an intense and none too happy experience, like being attacked by a familiar body. When I saw a man's body, it

didn't disgust me—I found it a little exciting and was able to be around it quite comfortably.

But Han's body I didn't dare imagine. The moment I thought of it the word "pain" appeared before my eyes and my heart shrank back. It produced a subtle feeling quite different from being with a man. When I was with her I was very clearly aware of my terror of her body—that I feared even my gaze touching her. At the same time I felt a contradictory, greedy desire to stare at her, touch her. I had to deliberately control my impulse to rush at her and brutally possess her. Were I a man, I thought, I'd probably have to beat her cruelly every day to balance out such contradictory feelings. I couldn't help laughing tears.

What I had been was now smashed into little pieces. I was utterly unable to find my place along the axes of masculine and feminine.

That night, the rising crescent moon shone with a desolate beauty. Han arrived home early, knocking madly at the wooden door. "I'm in trouble, come quick!" I hurried out to find her leaning, exhausted, against the wall. The hem of her knee-length skirt was covered in drops of red, and blood ran down her calves and onto the floor.

"Just now...at Treasure King...two clients came up together...then..."

Ashen-faced, she forced her mouth closed. Her eyes on me, with great effort she raised her right hand to her forehead and made a salute of apology. It was as though her feelings were being carved into me with a knife: She felt remorse.

My mind was in utter chaos. All I was aware of was a small, sharp voice reminding me: You must not break down.

Unconscious of what I was doing, I carried her to the bed, took off all her clothes, and found water, alcohol, towels, cotton wool, and antiseptic. Without a word I bathed her body with water and dabbed antiseptic on her wounded private parts and thighs. She stared at me, eyes wide with shock. Gradually her gaze became pathetic, begging for my pity.

"They hurt me...", she said suddenly in a thin, weak voice. She gasped with sobs that were like bullets exploding in my chest, each

one striking my heart. Unlocking my reservoir of tears I began to howl, working my lungs with all the strength I had.

"I can't protect you . . . I wish I was dead . . ."

She extended her pure white arms in invitation to me, and I became sharply aware that our bodies were crying out for each other. I took off my own clothes and my flesh was pulled naturally toward hers until our skins stuck together like glue. My hands madly caressed every inch of her flesh and my lips greedily sucked at her hair, her eyes, her lips, her breasts, between her legs. . . . The whole volcano erupted.

"I hate you . . . Why aren't you a man . . ."

With her face covered in tears and her unruly hair stuck to her cheeks, she bit the flesh of my shoulder until I was ready to pass out with pain. In my confusion I was aware that my short hair had suddenly grown long and was fastening itself tightly about her neck.

At last, in a gap between two people, I see purple. The hair tied down under my hat begins to stir, making the hat puff up. "She" is sitting on a marble stool, laughing easily and holding up a wineglass, drinking the health of the man opposite her. "She" is surrounded by a circle of men. The laser lights begin their orbit and one after another they move across "her" face as "she" pushes back "her" long hair. In my mind I slow down "her" action at that moment, and behind closed eyes imagine "her" hair sprinkling out colored sparks as it falls back.

(Han: I follow you like this day after day, looking at you from a distance, just as before I used to drive you around. With time my hair has gradually grown long again—long enough soon to strangle you once more. This is my hair's "inclination," just as you must prostitute yourself, and just as I am . . .)

I follow "her" into the women's washroom, take out my scissors, and before "she" has a chance to scream, *snip snap*, I chop off the hair in great hanks. The fallen hair flies over and winds itself around "her," snatching off "her" longhaired wig. In the mirrors along both walls I see a bald man, and I can't tell who it is.

NOTES

1. Liou Liang-ya, "Aiyu, xingbie yu shuxie" (Desire, Gender and Writing), in *Chung-wai Literary Monthly* 303 (August 1997): 8–9, my translation.
2. A *qipao* is a traditional tight-fitting dress made of embroidered satin or silk, with splits up the side of the leg. *Trans.*

A STORY OF SPRING BUTTERFLIES



CHU T'IENT-HSIN

Chu T'ien-hsin (b. 1958) is a critically acclaimed author whose literary prizes include several *China Times* literature prizes and the *United Daily News* Novel Prize. Her sensitive and lively writings on the relationships between friends in girls' schools have been read devotedly by a generation of lesbian readers. *The Pushpin Song: Notes from Three Years at Taipei First Girls' School* (1984) and *Days on the Ark* (1988) are particularly popular within local lesbian subcultures. This story, originally serialized in the *China Times* (April 16–17, 1992), is from Chu's 1992 collection, *Thinking of My Brothers in the Veterans' Neighborhood*. Chu T'ien-hsin is the sister of author Chu T'ien-wen (this volume).

This story is a playful, fictional meditation on the subject of homosexuality, with a twist in the tail. Even though the narrator admits from the outset his/her intention to confound the reader's preconceived ideas about his/her gender, the story was the subject of considerable controversy among local lesbian and gay scholars because it speaks about love between women in what is ultimately revealed to be a man's narratorial voice. The authority of

this voice is bolstered initially by the exhibition of a wide-ranging and eclectic knowledge on homosexuality in European thought, from Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Foucault. But that authority begins to show signs of unraveling as the story progresses toward the narrator's final defeat. Indeed, perhaps his repetitive, almost compulsive citation of scholarly knowledge might be read as a screen for the other kind of knowledge, more personal and less easily admissible, which eventually comes to light in the final revelation.



Dear friend, please don't try yet to guess my gender. Is it man-man? Or woman-man? Woman-woman? Or is it man-woman?

It's not that I fear responsibility for the repercussions of the war among the four genders that might be provoked by a moment's slip. I merely hope you don't presume to have ascertained my gender through guesswork, and thereby bring to my narrative preconceptions that might cause you to miss a chance of _____ (the word to fill those blanks may be assigned by those who have read the entire text; the number of spaces may of course be increased or decreased).

Then allow me to conceal myself for the moment among these four genders, man-man, woman-man, woman-woman, man-woman.

Yes, I have the mad fancy of conducting upon this thirteen-letter word "homosexuality" a labor of undoing, deconstruction, subversion, even demystification.

These days, in the opinion of society's most conservative personages—that class that one might say demarcates the baseline of tolerance—homosexuality remains, for the most part, a dirty word. But in many more populous, more conspicuous circles—and here one immediately thinks of the art scene, the cultural scene, theater, the dance and performance scene, the world of architecture and design—it's more like a laurel they wear high on their heads to signify loftiness and wisdom. Take note, it's "they" as in man-men and woman-men,

never the feminine “they,” whatever you call them: *lesbian*, *tomboy*. . . . So, you guessed it, I want to pull the laurel down from their heads!

I admit this is a formidable task.

One must begin of course with Plato, whom they so love to invoke.

From conversations among the elite of that time one can clearly ascertain their general attitude toward relationships between man and man, and man and woman. For example, one man (Aristophanes) said that originally there were three kinds of people: male, female, and male-female, all of them strong and courageous. They defied heaven, and in order to punish them without annihilating them completely, the primary god, Zeus, cut each of them in two. After they were cut, this half yearned for that, and having attained it was ever unwilling to part with it.

Among these, those cut from male-females became the unrestrainedly carnal heterosexuals. The women created from divided females preferred female company and were indifferent to men; while the men created from divided males in turn preferred male friendships and went to great lengths to cultivate them.

Another man (Socrates’ friend, Pausanias) held simply that there were two kinds of love: the exalted and the common.

Common love valued flesh over spirit. But it cared nothing for whether the pilgrimage to satisfy its desire was an exalted one or not. This rude, reckless love, slave to convention, was the province of the most foolish. The common-love god was relatively tender in years and born of the union of male with female. The exalted-love god, on the other hand, was born of men and bore no relation at all to women. The object of this love was youths alone.

In a word, Greek love existed only between man and man, to the exclusion of women.

Generally speaking, I am in agreement.—Feminists, please hold your fire.

The way I see it, in those times not far removed from backwardness and ignorance, contraceptive technology was quite undeveloped, and moreover, for most, reproduction of the next generation

was compelled by a powerful survival instinct. Although many stories circulated of great love between heterosexuals, in reality it would have been all but impossible to calculate the demarcation between the part of emotion in married life and the part of reproduction. Indeed this fact many people (Aristophanes, Pausanias . . .) found insupportable. By comparison, the feelings between men, serving no purpose whatever, appeared in the eyes of their great wisdom much purer, more idealistic, longer-lived—yes, much more exalted.

As well as extolling these feelings and nurturing them diligently with pride and eloquence, they believed that the practice of pleasure between men should be used to cultivate virtue, and strove to combine the practice with the pursuit of virtue and scholarship. In their relations they held fast to ritual, believing that only through the thorough ritualization of the thing could virtue and wisdom be advanced. Their honest dealings with those boys cannot be classed as pederasty. They disciplined themselves through ritual, daring no transgression: In the relationship of taking and giving, each held to his proper place. This love born of restrained action, although a kind of deceit, is no cause for shame.

Furthermore, it was with sophistication and maturity that they earnestly debated the pros and cons of various views on these feelings in the city-state of Athens, to which they belonged, and in other lands. They even made some overridealistic regulations about the objects of their love. They believed that converts to their erotic reform were intelligent, courageous gentlemen among men, and their adoration for them was incomparable. The relationships among them were characterized by exaltedness and purity. As for their beloveds, they did not look upon them as children but loved and protected them for the talents and wisdom they sensed gradually developing. They selflessly dedicated their lives to them and did not belittle them for their relative weakness and youth.

At the same time, they upheld a prohibition on loving young children, even advocating a legal proscription. This was because it was impossible to foresee whether a child would in future be good or bad, and if by some mischance he turned out bad, wouldn't it be a sad waste to see one's lifeblood poured out for nothing?!

So free were they of desires and demands, each asking nothing of the other, and so ruthlessly did they subject themselves to their own rigorous, saintly pilgrimages, to which even the gods themselves could not aspire, that if they judged the position of this love higher than that of heterosexuality and the ordinary system of marriage—if they even despised the latter as a common love that was coarse, loving only the flesh and not the soul; inconstant; declining with the ebb in sexual interest—then I have no objection, truly. Because I agree indeed that since ancient times heterosexuals have actually spent more than half their lives dealing with sexual desire and sex—when I say “dealing with,” I’m naturally including both resisting and rejecting, and enjoying and indulging.—Heterosexuals, please also hold your fire and permit me to discourse upon my reasoning presently.

But then—because of Christianity’s devaluation and prohibition of homosexuality?—they became like a race expelled from the Garden of Eden; even more like the snake that was cursed for tempting the woman to defy God’s orders. Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed, it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise her heel—

And so dust they have eaten all the days of their life; upon their belly have they gone; and in the depths of the earth have they concealed themselves for more than a thousand years.

They embrace darkness, and embrace all that tends to multiply in dark places.

Leading this life that sees not the light of day, it’s not difficult to understand how they went from their saintly life-philosophy to being the group that best knows how to take pleasure in the body, even to the point of madness. Michel Foucault, who died of AIDS in 1984, has told us that since the middle ages, heterosexual experience has been composed of two major aspects: one, the pursuit of a marriage partner, as happens between men and women; the other, sex itself.

Foucault believed that ever since Christianity stripped homosexuality of the tools of representation, homosexuals have been forced to pour all their energies into sex itself.

To me they seem like the wine god, Dionysus, cast down by Zeus from that high palace. A short poem by the English poet Milton has described it thus:

Thrown by angry Jove
Sheer o'er the crystal battlements: from morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day; and with the setting sun
Dropt from the zenith like a falling star,
On Lemnos, th' Aegean isle. . . .¹

(Have I remembered it wrong? Was it the wine god? Or the fire god, repudiated for his ugliness and lameness?)

If you don't object, to describe them I'd like to appropriate one of the two spirits identified by Nietzsche in his research on Greek tragedy: the Dionysian wine spirit.

The Dionysian spirit searches for the meaning of existence by destroying the fetters and restrictions one constantly meets with in life. Those with this kind of disposition attempt, at the most precious moment, to break free of the shackles of the senses in order to move on to another level of experience. In both personal encounters and ritual activities, the Dionysian spirit wants always to push things to the point of excess.

Nietzsche believed that drunkenness was the most appropriate analogy for this emotional disposition and for this reason placed great value on the fiery glow of the emotions in that state. There are also those, of course, who think that music or other artistic pursuits are comparable; there are those, too (the North American Indians) who rush to consume the venomous mandala flower or the fruit of a type of cactus, seeking a fantasy world that shatters the conditions of reality.

Myself, I feel it is homosexuality that compares most appropriately with the pleasures of the descendants of the wine god, because when a homosexual friend of mine described the wild enchantment between himself and his partner, it was precisely congruent with Nietzsche's observations on the Dionysian spirit—perhaps even more extreme.

We must, of course, be clear that of the two major characteristics of the wine god's culture—the spirit of unrestraint and the worship of procreation—the homosexuals have from the outset emasculated the latter's function, while the former has undergone a kind of redoubled overdevelopment. So can we still be shocked at the behaviors of these descendants of the wine god, which arise out of a craving for wild experiences and a desire to break the everyday fetters of the senses, and leave us wide-eyed and tongue-tied? (Of course among these, the straightforward pursuit of carnal intercourse is the most common and simplest, but there are also not a few who devote themselves to proliferating spiritual descendants through the creation of all types of artistic works and performances.)

In fairness, we—like them, part of humankind—cannot help but be grateful at times that they do what we dare not (rising up without thought for the consequences against what one might call the all but defunct boundaries set in place by humankind over millennia), even though their actions frequently bring them only a hairbreadth away from death or immorality; even though most of us either dare not look closely at the realms they open up, or else ignore them completely.

But at the same time it's possible, too, that they pay a price for this—by which I don't, of course, mean AIDS. The English poet William Blake said, "The road of excess leads to wisdom." But they find their many forms of excess (most often recognized in the pursuit of and indulgence in carnal desire) truly difficult to forgive.

Of course the descendants of the wine god come in many forms, just as there are many different types among the heterosexual majority. Among these, the ones that interest me least are those influenced by environmental factors (like single-sex schools, prisons, the army). Neither am I curious about those who merely seek physical thrills, like the bisexual friend who told me of the intense rectal pleasure of "being ridden" that his wife was unable to give him. I don't even care to debate with those superior individuals among them who love to boast about how their group rises above the common herd. Actually, they all have a narcissus complex to a greater or lesser degree: the being-pursued, being-pleased, or even being-ridden that men are unable to enjoy within heterosexual relationships are all thoroughly enjoyed by them in homosexual ones.

Put it this way: Can you imagine that a star or dancer who's accustomed to swooning over his own shadow in the limelight (be it the limelight of his life or that of an actual stage), admiring himself like a swan preening its plumage, could in real life so easily cast aside his postures and dethrone himself from the place of honor in order to dedicate himself to the pursuit of a woman? No; he can only be appreciated, be pursued—pursued by a macho man who goes after his mate with force. (The thousand-year-old legend tells us that even the infatuation of the love goddess cannot touch him.) Perhaps this explains why on the day promoted by the World Health Organization as World AIDS Day—December 1, 1991—nearly four thousand American arts groups took part in “The Day without Art.”

I'm curious about those rare, all but vanished descendants of Plato.

They seem to live as saints of the golden age, haughty and aloof, incapable of mixing with the lower orders. They could debate rigorously with themselves for decades (Are they willing to admit their own sexual orientation? Could they bear life after admitting it, a life that would never be the same again?...) yet refuse even for a moment to relax their vigilance toward their flesh. He might be in a *disco* in a converted Catholic church in New York, inside a tiny room like a sauna cabin watching twenty or thirty people crowded in for group sex, and yet his heart is as blank as the icy snows of the South Pole, untrodden by human feet.

Although on the verge of extinction, people like this are not difficult to spot in a crowd. Qu Yuan in exile, wandering and reciting on the water's edge, his face haggard, his figure gaunt.² No matter where they are (the places specializing in male love advertised in *Esquire*—*The Spike*, *Hellfire Club*, *Plato's Retreat*...) they seem like Qu Yuan with his disheveled hair, wandering and reciting on the banks of the Miluo River.³

But I hope you don't misunderstand and think all this implies that I rank spiritual love higher than all other kinds of love. I don't so much believe that those of us who can't do without fleshly love are envious of their lack of enslavement to the body; it's more that I delight in the self-esteem and self-respect that permeates their entire

being with such clear luminescence. Like others, they are that animal called “man,” different from other animals; but they are probably the only group that devotes itself to maintaining and developing the difference. So no matter in which camp one places them (regardless of whether heterosexual or homosexual), they’re worthy of honor and respect.

By comparison, heterosexuals, who up to the present have been in the majority, seem a group of undeveloped savages: robust, reckless, simple-minded, and naive, inanely following their instincts and dutifully reproducing descendants, and through this of course enjoying the added bonus of bodily pleasure. All the many admirable and tragic or pitiable and ridiculous love stories that they have created, and their products (not children—what I refer to are literature, poetry and song, art, and other artistic products) are, in essence, no different from some primitive man prior to the last ice age hefting his herbivorous prey gleefully back to the cave to beg consent to copulate with the female primitive.

—I’ve all but given away my identity?! Then so as to be fair, let me give the heterosexuals an identity as well: descendants of the sun god. I hope the simile isn’t too forced.

In contrast to the wine god, Nietzsche points to another central type in Greek tragedy: the Apollonian.

The descendants of the sun god could never imagine the wild abandon experienced by the sons of the wine god. The few that do come in contact with it do their best to expel the unsettling experience from thought, word, and deed and return obediently to the world to which they’re accustomed, prudently impartial, with neither the desire nor the curiosity to explore the outer limits of the human soul and body.

They cannot allow themselves to enter a state of confusion and loss of control, Nietzsche says. Even in the throes of ecstasy they maintain themselves, upholding their identity as citizens.

That’s right, their identity as citizens. They have invented a marriage system that draws the envy, jealousy, and mockery of the descendants of the wine god, and through it they can legitimately and publicly exercise the right to their partner’s reproductive organs.

In this they find pleasure, protection, burden, curse, cause to flee, means for the redistribution of wealth (in some cultural traditions, marriage is an important way of handing down assets)....

It's frightening. The numerous descendants of the sun god are so naive and innocent, yet for the past several millennia we have entrusted most of the republic's construction to their design, supervision, and implementation. If one among them transgresses lightly, he is sneered at as a Don Quixote; in the case of a severe transgression, all society stands on guard as though faced with a dangerous enemy — need we be reminded? For the past several centuries women, long the disadvantaged of the two sexes, have incessantly been instructed thus: "You, you are nothing, you are only your sex!"

After women there are minorities, the disabled, youth... and the other familiar disadvantaged groups who have a hard time fitting into the bright, healthy Apollonian republic where the sun shines down equally on all.

Given this, can we still find it strange that the descendants of the sun god should now and then seek to punish the wine god's progeny?

Over the last hundred years, cutting-edge psychiatry has applied itself to controlling homosexuals. At first it wanted to lock them up, then it wanted to treat them. Sometimes they were called the disciples of profligacy; sometimes they were viewed as having bad habits; more often they were called madmen or sexual perverts.

All they have suffered from the republic as a result of this — prejudice, the breaking off of family relations, being put in psychiatric hospitals, electroshock therapy, imprisonment, isolation — this seems to me not due to the fact they so obviously can't fit into the republic's system of social morality and thus offend and transgress against the descendants of the sun god. Rather I see it all as an absurd kind of muddle-headed punishment by the Apollonians resulting from what is really only an unconscious instinctive reaction, aimed at preserving humanity through the reproduction of the next generation.

In this I also have great sympathy for the descendants of the sun god. Just as we are thankful for and treasure the way the descendants of the wine god push the boundaries for us, shouldn't good

manners prompt us also to express gratitude to heterosexuals for taking on the crucial task of reproducing our next generation, in the past and the present? And forgive their ensuing behavior, an exaggerated form of self-defense.

I suppose what I cannot have sympathy for are bisexuals who seek purely and simply bodily pleasure. They are generally not gender-dysphoric or transsexual, nor is there any difference at all between their frontal lobes and those of heterosexuals, and naturally they don't have the problem of not having feelings or sexual desire for women. They have the opportunity and freedom to choose, but often, even while having a female lover or wife, they won't give up—may even favor—a man (in contrast with the above-mentioned, who are forced to do so).

The response I most frequently hear to this question is that the climax of passion when man makes love with man is far beyond compare with the orgasm man reaches with woman. How this causes the descendants of the sun god to puzzle and envy and disbelieve!

But I believe it.

I believe that leaving aside the emotional factor, the orgasm of man with man must certainly surpass that of man with woman. Now don't conjecture again about my identity, truly I say this because theoretically, the whole thing adds up.

First, we cannot deny that there exist very significant innate differences between the sexes.

Implanted one at a time, all the spermatozoa produced by a healthy, normal man in a lifetime would create the world's population an infinite number of times over, but the most a woman can produce in her lifetime is four hundred ova. Under these circumstances of so great a disparity in comparative output, man has the instinctive impulse to spread his seed about widely, and for this reason in his sexual behavior he is active and aggressive.

And woman? Her opportunities are obviously far fewer. She must select the best quality for her limited number of ova. Throughout the long history of mankind's evolution, during which there were no contraceptive methods to speak of, she has known only too well that the result of sex is children (even in the case of those primitives

who did not clearly understand the subtle details of the reproduction that occurs in the moment of union between man and woman, and classed it along with dreaming, wind, washing in the river, and all kinds of other symbolic or natural phenomena). She knew that she had to be pregnant for nine months, that she had to care tirelessly for the child from infancy to adolescence, and that during this lengthy period she would lose almost all opportunity and time for an independent existence and could only look toward and rely upon the master who gave her the seed.

In consideration of such practical questions she must carefully and scrupulously compare sexual partners and select one likely to offer her protection and safety. (This is also why I maintain that the progress of mankind is actually due mainly to the actions of women, because the key choices and decisions about "the quality of mankind" have not been made by men, heedlessly scattering their seed in all directions, but rather through women's scrupulous selection.) For this reason their sexual activity tends toward conservatism, prudence, and caution.

They are like the inert elements in chemistry. In contrast, men are the energetic, unstable elements.

If we compare the union between people with a chemistry experiment, isn't the result very clear? Common sense tells us that inert plus inert is unlikely to produce any chemical reaction at all, and the chemical change produced by reactive and inert can be imagined just as well. Then what about reactive and reactive? Intense, rapid, needing no catalyst, full of danger, releasing great quantities of light and heat—like nitroglycerine.

A single bisexual friend of mine once told me that the passion he experienced with a woman—no matter how sexy she was—could not compare with one hundredth of what he experienced with his male lover. Their first chemistry experiment left everything in ruins for miles around.

Let us cast off the moral system of the Apollonian republic, as far as possible, in order to draw our conclusion. Spiritual lovers (hetero- and homosexual) are like holy monks passing through a ruined battlefield. Heterosexuals are like *homo sapiens*—kingdom: animal; sub-

phylum: vertebrate; class: mammal; family: hominid. Descendants of the wine god are like Dionysus and the flock of half-man half-goat Pans that accompany him, while bisexuals are beasts lacking the benefit of even half a human body. (I swear this terminology implies no value judgment whatever.)

But haven't we omitted another group, secret and hidden to the point that we truly almost forgot them?

Among chemical elements they are inert with inert, creating no reaction, producing no spark, emitting no fantastic colors. I don't know what I should call them. They are extraordinarily lovely, like spring butterflies in enchantingly crisp, bright sunshine.

I cannot help mentioning another very lyrical and moving line from Foucault, spoken by one of the descendants of the wine god among whom he numbered. He said that for a homosexual, love's most beautiful moment is when your lover gets out of the taxi, when the sex is over, the boy has left, and you begin to imagine his warmth, his voice, his smile. In a homosexual relationship the most important thing is memory, not expectation.

I believe that if one of the spring butterfly girls were willing to speak about those feelings that are theirs alone, her words would be in no way inferior to those of the master, substantial content or moving lyricism aside.

Why am I so certain?

First, I think I need to acquaint you with, or remind you of, a feeling that's very difficult to describe. (I've decided to use this relatively value-free word, "feeling," leaving to one side the cryptic, ambiguous word "love.") It's the purest kind of feeling, which as a result has nothing to do with the body, nor with the many kinds of pain and suffering it causes. (Do you need me to give examples? Possession, jealousy, yearning, malice....)

Don't rush to contradict me just yet, saying you've never had any experience of this nature and therefore don't believe this feeling exists. Whether you're a man or a woman, I ask that you think carefully back—it may not be easy—to your distant adolescence, before you had secondary sexual characteristics and all the strange psychological and physiological feelings that they bring....

There: That sweet, tiny lover stands far off on the other bank of time's river, yes? It was before you moved house. You loved each other through many summer vacations and winters that seemed so very long. You were devoted to each other. You never thought of revenge, because there was no question of "possession" or the lack of it; the expression of your feelings was as simple as could be, and amid the rowdy children's games you exchanged unnoticed smiles between the shadows of others. The way it shook the depths of the heart and soul far surpasses adulthood's exchanges of copious words and body fluids. You even slept peacefully night after night, not thinking of tomorrow; in any case you were sure of seeing each other every day, and your body was simply incapable of desire and yearning. When she moved house and left, you weren't heartbroken and you didn't cry, because you didn't comprehend what it meant to be no longer physically together.

That's the feeling I'm talking about. Even if there were possession, jealousy, and rage, they differed greatly from the poison possession, poison jealousy, and poison rage of adulthood that have their roots in the body. That's right, as long as there's feeling—feeling that arises from the body—it's like poisoning, demonic possession, a malignant tumor. Yes, in comparison with childish love, healthy, open Apollonian love is like someone mortally ill.

By adulthood, it's gone forever.

Do you miss it?

Do you long for it?

(Sounds like the words of an advertisement for some product or other.)

The spring butterfly girls' feelings are just like this.

Inert element with inert element, they don't ardently pursue sexual activity. According to statistics from the research of expert sexologists—at variance with the somewhat malicious conjectures of the outside world—they seldom use electric dildos or mutual masturbation; even in extreme cases, those that play the *tomboy* role rarely have *penis envy*. It's even unusual for them to have had unhappy heterosexual experiences, unlike what we assert: that it must be that no men wanted them or that they were hurt in love, divorced, frigid, dumped. . . .

You say I'm wielding the great banner of spiritual love once more?! You say I've given myself away as simply a feminist or a lesbian?!

In relation to the first question, I think that even Plato's followers among the descendants of the wine god differ greatly from the spring butterfly girls. The former, for various reasons (fastidiousness, disdain, narcissism, idealism . . .) abstain from the flesh and reject it, like clergymen or Buddhist monks. But this is not to say that the spirit can follow the example of the body and successfully vanquish desire. On the contrary, forsaking the flesh often necessitates redoubled compensation from the spirit. You can imagine that the most frequent treatment encountered by the Platonic man who wants only spiritual intercourse is the continual request for him, a partner who cannot satisfy the flesh, to remove himself, both physically and spiritually.

Do not rebuke them. Today, in the well-populated Apollonian republic, how many can you find who speak only of spiritual love?

So can you still puzzle as to why their faces are haggard and their figures gaunt, like wild-haired Qu Yuans wandering and reciting?

My Platonic friend said to me: Accustomed to being a solitary island; accustomed to watching the shadows of birds slide through the great clear sky from inside that worm-eaten house; accustomed to pounding my own heart until it cannot be pulverized any further; accustomed to habitual madness; what remains there to which I could not grow accustomed?

In what way is this the same as the spring butterfly girls, enjoying spiritual solace and offering each other succor in their plight without ever becoming slaves to the body? Yet the treatment they receive is not entirely just. For example, we often hear ordinary folk impetuously declare: "Homosexuals—imagining two grown men cuddled up together is so disgusting! Two women, I can stand."

In numerous literary and artistic works (regardless of whether they are homosexual works or not) the female body remains a frequent subject of description. But it is merely like other beautiful objects, or commodities of an even lower order. It has never, like the male body, been approached with the artist's wholehearted diligence—truly for him, woman, no matter whether her figure is good

or bad or her looks pretty or ugly, is only, is only a lump of fat. Didn't some theologian in the dark ages announce with great shock and self-righteousness, "Women *do* have souls!"

You say that no matter whether I am a feminist and you risk offending me, you must raise a little contrary evidence.

You say in what way are lesbians so spiritual and so lovely?! I know, of course, that you're going to raise that incident from not long ago of the psychology lecturer at a certain university who burned her lover alive with kerosene. Actually I'll even give you a hand: How about the disturbance in the courts caused by the internationally renowned female bridge player Madame Wei Chongqing and her female partner; and needless to mention the two generations of queens of the tennis net, Billie Jean King and Navratilova, and their various romantic tragedies.

Without wanting to talk my way out of it, I must explain that as in the republic or in the realm of the wine god, there are all kinds. But looking at the same example from the opposite perspective, isn't it enough to make us wonder: a feeling that does not involve the body, or relies only slightly on the body, and yet is so intense, enduring, not eroding, even growing ever bigger in the darkness—couldn't this help us to explain many things?

According to what you and I understand from the media, the psychology lecturer had pursued her female partner for over ten years. She not only ignored the fact that her female partner was married with children but, in order to increase her own competitiveness, even went to far-off Europe for several years to get a degree, staying rigorously and pitifully faithful to the rule of survival of the fittest that governed the masculine world of her female partner's husband.

I admit that actually, aside from envying them, I really know nothing about lesbians. How does it begin? Why do they turn that way? What makes the process get suspended? Why is it able to be suspended? Why does it recur again? What is the true length of the latency period?

Speaking honestly, they are so spiritual (separated for over ten years and their feelings continue to blaze undiminished; like a diamond, like a poly-plastic bottle), so tranquil and unassuming (mean-

ing that because it often hasn't noticed their existence, the republic hasn't disciplined them in any way), and so elusive, that it leads one, leads one to madness.

My wife—at last, I have revealed my identity—we have always been fortunate, happy, good citizens of the Apollonian republic. For this reason I disdained the two or three sons of the wine god who attempted to seduce or harass me in the boys' dormitory at college and at the military training camp at Chenggong Ridge.⁴ But of lesbianism I knew nothing. I thought it was just something misguidedly fabricated by girls in girls' schools to relieve their boredom.

So why have I the leisure to daydream about contact between man and man?! Since before we were married, my love for my wife has been like a persistent fever. When she became a mother I was bewitched, too, by the slight increase in her weight and the motherly, wifely look of her with a belly no longer taut and pretty. To me she is gentle as jade, like the Greek goddess statues of the Renaissance.

After over ten years of marriage I still feel I've never seen enough of her, and whenever I can, I pull back her clothing with unwaning interest and stare hungrily at her under the lamplight. Please don't misunderstand and think that I suffer from some mania or syndrome, or that I consider the woman who is my wife a plaything. For she responds to me with ardent passion. How is it, then, that I believe the union of man with man might be greater than ours (if, as I said earlier, one leaves out the element of feeling? I believe that the orgasm between men is certainly greater than that between man and woman; but please take note, the precondition is that one must leave out the element of feeling).

I should never have discovered those two letters. . . .

Have you guessed?

Still, I want to tell you.

When she was at university, before she met me, she had many close friends, among whom A is the one of whom she speaks most often. The theme is invariably the richness of A's emotional life (in the eyes of us boys this would have meant her private life was very loose); that she was forever switching boyfriends, that kind of thing.

My wife describes all this without judgment, including of course

how talented A was, that she was the flower of the department and the leader of one of the university's important student societies, and that from a young age she took part in all kinds of extracurricular activities. . . . My wife was a typical goody-goody girl student, and when she speaks of A's many experiences she does so without envy or longing.

I have never once seen A.

When we got married, A's card sat among the others, not particularly remarkable. At the time I think she was studying in New York, and apart from the usual congratulations she only said she'd been living with such-and-such a man (I didn't know him).

In the years that followed, A was not one of the friends who kept up regular correspondence with my wife. Only once every three years or so, at Christmas or on my wife's birthday would she briefly reappear. It was impossible to write much on the cards she sent, and the words she did write were very ordinary. Just once they made me laugh to myself—she said she now went about her business alone.

On that winter weekend evening my wife and I had caroused till the small hours. Afterward I was exhausted and soon fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke it was already light, but my wife wasn't by my side. She was asleep, leaning on the nearby desk with the lamp on, wrapped haphazardly in a coat of mine that didn't conceal the beautiful naked body inside and the smell of my tobacco and body that emanated from it.

It was the Christmas card that lay on the desk and the reply she'd written that checked my desire to disturb her once again.

The Christmas card was from A; I'd seen it a few days before when it arrived. But now suddenly it jumped out at me word by word. A—she of the populous emotional life—said that the evening before writing the letter, she was on her way home from seeing some Broadway show, crossing the Brooklyn Bridge and looking at the night city with all its lights, thinking of a certain piece of music, when she remembered the past—actually, that's all it said.

Yet I don't know why my heart beat so fast. Stealthily (because I had never done this before) I pulled out the unsealed reply, and in

barely two or three lines my wife's so familiar handwriting said: Over the past ten years I've experienced love, been a wife, been a mother; I've experienced every one of life's emotions. I only know that what I felt with you back then is beyond compare.

So in the end, I'm defeated.

I admit I haven't pulled down anyone's laurel, and I've even lost the courage I had to begin with when I wanted to hand the crown to them—the spring butterfly girls.

There remains nothing whatever for me to say. . . .

So, the last one to leave the republic (no matter who you are), don't forget to turn out the lights. But please, do forget its darkness.

NOTES

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1, lines 741–746. Obviously, *Paradise Lost* can hardly be called a “short poem.” *Trans.*

2. Qu Yuan was a poet and statesman of the Chu kingdom during the Warring States period (fourth century B.C.). Despite his integrity he was exiled by the government, perhaps due to the slanders of corrupt officials. In exile he wandered the countryside composing poetry that extolled the kingdom from which he was banished, until finally he drowned himself in an act of despair and protest, in the Miluo River. Local fishermen who loved him failed to save him, but drove away the fish that would eat his body by splashing the water with their paddles, and dropped rice dumplings into the river to feed his spirit. His life is commemorated today in the Dragon Boat Festival in the fifth lunar month. *Trans.*

3. See previous note.

4. Chenggong Ridge is the location of a military training camp to which boys used to be sent as part of their military service. *Trans., with thanks to Chi Tawei.*

STONES ON THE SHORE



HSU YOSHEN

Hsu Yoshen (b. 1961) is a prolific popular gay writer and was a key figure in Taiwan's 1990s gay cultural scene. He has published numerous books of gay-themed fiction and essays and has been prominent in Taiwan's local print media and broadcasting industries. He came out publicly with an open wedding to his Uruguayan partner, Gray Harriman, in Taipei in 1996. This wedding, as much as his writing and his leading role in local gay cultural events, made Hsu a central icon of the 1990s *tongzhi* movement and the model of a *tongzhi* public intellectual.

This story is from his first collection, *Romance's Reward*. It is the only story in this anthology set completely outside Taiwan—in New York City—and the only one to deal with cross-cultural relationships in a contemporary setting. It adds something new to the “rice queen”—“potato queen” sexual politics it represents by the inclusion of a mainland Chinese character. The cultural differences apparent in the relationship between the mainlander and the Taiwanese protagonist are just as evident, and just as complex, as those

that fracture the Taiwanese–white American relationships the story also describes. This piece may prove startling to some American readers in its candid disgust with the American “rice queens.” But it is also interesting for the way it depicts the mainland Chinese man as a hypermasculine father figure to the Taiwanese protagonist. In its representation of mainland-Taiwan relations through the analogy of father-son relations, and in its “queering” of all these by the avowal of a homosexual desire internal to each pair, the story recalls Pai Hsien-yung’s classic 1983 novel, *Crystal Boys* (published in Howard Goldblatt’s 1995 translation).



Cao Xuantian had always been afraid of water. When his mother washed his hair as a kid, the instant she picked up the ladle to wet him, he’d start yelling so hard he couldn’t draw breath, making his face into that of a hanged man. One time he held his breath so long he really did pass out, which made him the butt of the family’s jokes ever after. He speculated he’d ended up a drowned man’s ghost in his previous life and skimmed on the Soup of Forgetting¹ before reincarnation. That was the only way he could explain why the terror of drowning shadowed him to this day.

But right now Cao Xuantian was sinking into a whirlpool, the spiraling current clutching at his legs, turbulent seawater sucking wave after wave, pummeling his swollen flesh. He stretched his arms for something to hold on to but was snatched back by the current and sank like a stone while a million bubbles gnawed at his skin. When the pressure reached bursting point he forced out a final breath and was assailed by a wave of shaky numbness, until finally he gave a moan and ejaculated.

In an instant all the wild billows of seawater slipped away like a grass mat rolled back. Cao Xuantian regained consciousness and realized he’d emerged from the sea of desire in which he’d been immersed. Only now did he remember the person lying beside him in his arms: the man called Meng Gang. The two of them had reached orgasm at the same moment, and the oneness of their arousal now moved him almost to tears.

He gazed at Meng Gang's shut-eyed profile. He'd never really believed that the face that radiated such brilliance on stage would end up as he'd wished it, resting here in the crease of his neck.

That night Cao Xuantian had had time on his hands and gone to see a National Day dance performance. Before Meng Gang came on stage he'd all but fallen asleep in his chair. But when that unyielding northern face appeared, cleaving the black of the backcloth and outshining the stage lighting, Cao Xuantian sat upright.

He stared at that face, finding it unaccountably familiar: Surely this wasn't the first time he'd seen those square, hard cheeks, those sharp cheekbones, even that stubborn expression? As the yellow lights came up on stage and the background sank into darkness, that face floated dimly in his memory. Suddenly he realized: Pressed at the bottom of the sandalwood trunk at home was a photograph of his young father in his soldier's uniform. He looked exactly like him.

Father's glowing face in that photograph seemed unaffected by the ravages of time, remaining eternally radiant. Years ago, Father used to solemnly don that treasured army uniform on each anniversary of Grandmother's death. He said that was Grandmother's final image of him before she died. Father would carry out the obeisances and make the ritual offerings, kowtowing before the ancestral tomb with the whole family, young and old lining up to worship after him. Later on, Father seemed to age very quickly, and the army uniform stayed crushed at the bottom of the trunk. Cao Xuantian still missed the scent of camphor that emanated from that uniform.

Now all at once the young officer's face had come back to life on this stage in New York, a million miles from home. In that moment the dancer metamorphosed into limitless forms, a solemn arhat² descended to earth. Cao Xuantian examined Meng Gang's photograph in the program: a proud military crew cut, each hair standing up straight as a spear. Beside the photo, letters that read "Nationality: Chinese" transformed suddenly into a line of lively little earthen figurines that danced sprightly under his gaze.

A few days later Cao Xuantian unexpectedly saw this face again at Sapphire. Delight splashed out like a pail of water spilled in his heart,

sprinkling all around. So, his compatriot was even more intimately connected with him than he'd thought—he was a fellow traveler.

Sapphire was New York's one remaining Asian gay bar, offering "specialties" from all over Asia. For foreigners who liked an oriental atmosphere it was the top spot for Asian delicacies. Many of the foreigners with this particular taste were old coots with potbellies and sagging skin, and as they mingled in the crowd under the bar's specially contrived blue lighting, they appeared like evil spirits incarnate, on the lookout for young flesh to gnaw. When the place was full to bursting, the hungry demons would strike, taking the opportunity afforded by the crowded conditions to go for the ingenuous Asians' pants, brushing nonchalantly against them and enjoying the delicacies to hand.

Cao Xuantian made his way with disgust through the crowd of drooling old men. He'd seen enough of their kind back in Taiwan's New Park, never imagining that here in far-off New York they'd turn out to be just as repulsive.³ But sometimes it cheered him to come here. It brought him a peculiar pleasure to see that even among foreigners, who usually had Asians swarming after them, there existed such poor specimens.

Just as he was making his way toward the earthly arhat, he saw that latched to his side was a bloodsucking insect. Despite the old guy's smart clothes, his hairy hands looked as repulsive as a couple of rakes clasped about the arhat's upright waist. At the edge of his mouth hovered a lascivious smirk, which in the blue light was indistinguishable from a drop of blood he'd yet to lick dry, gory and terrifying.

The excitement that had been caught in his chest since noticing the arhat turned to nausea, and Cao Xuantian drew rapidly back against the wall. The arhat held his head high as ever. He had the same air he'd worn on stage while basking in the audience's attention and seemed unaware of the feelers that were even now about his waist, palpitating their prey. The scene was one of bizarre tragedy. Cao Xuantian was considering whether to continue observing from where he stood by the wall when he was approached by an oblivious oldster. "Hey, good looking, why so low? Can I get you a drink?" As

the man's fat hand signaled his intention to join him, Cao Xuantian shot him a glare and beat a dispirited retreat.

In the days that followed, Cao Xuantian was oppressed by an indescribable panic that quickened his breath. He called Mi. As soon as Mi heard he'd been to Sapphire, the pitch of his voice rose an octave and he asked straight out whether he'd picked up. He had called Mi to tell him about the mainlander, but now he stopped himself halfway. He could almost hear Mi's disbelief. No doubt he'd shriek, "God! You come a million miles to New York and miss out on all the delectable Western food—just because you refuse to change your taste for Chinese cooking!"

Mi was a gay friend he'd known in Taiwan. After coming to America to study, he'd found a fag foreigner to live with. It was a regular marriage between China and the West. Mi had evidently adapted well to American gay society. He had a great appetite—now preferring Western food, he took his three daily meals at home as well as picnicking voraciously elsewhere. The first time Cao went to Sapphire it was this old horse who showed him the way. His practiced guide advised him, "Foreigners will swallow you whole. Don't let yourself be taken advantage of, but where there's an advantage to be taken, don't let it go to waste. Enjoy yourself: These guys don't expect much, and some of them are to make your eating finger⁴ tremble—much tastier than those small-fry back in Taiwan!"

"Mi's Theorem" went in one of Cao's ears and out the other, and Mi was forever chiding him for his narrow-mindedness. Mi placed his faith in the doctrine of the separation of sex and love. "It's one thing to fall in love, quite another to get these American studs into bed to keep your God-given flesh from idleness. How can you believe your body's joys are for you alone? That's all take and no give. I just don't get this insistence of yours on only sleeping with someone you love. You're living in a dream world!"

Cao Xuantian knew that to mention the arhat to Mi would only be asking for trouble. So aside from being so hard to bear, the secret slowly sedimenting at the bottom of his heart gradually acquired a savor of stealthy delight. He'd never imagined there'd be a day when a mainlander's name would be written on his heart. His father had

begun teaching him calligraphy when he was seven, big palm grasping his small hand, stroke by stroke writing the address of the old family home on the mainland. Complete with county, village, and neighborhood, the address made a long string of characters, but he learned to write it in a regular, stylish hand. Father smiled and tousled his hair, and began teaching him to recognize his home village on the begonia-shaped map⁵ where his eyes used to lose their way among the bright colors. Father made him practice his calligraphy every day.

This noble arhat by the name of Meng Gang was just the thing to soothe the wound in Cao Xuantian's heart. The love he'd had in Taiwan had burned to ashes, burning so hot he'd fled all the way to New York. His wounds often ached dully even now, and his new interest in Meng Gang helped take his mind off the pain.

The prescription of "arhat brand" might not be a wonder drug, but it was an effective painkiller. When he bumped into him again later at the art gallery, Cao Xuantian's heart jumped nervously, and it seemed to him that the old man in heaven had concocted a special pill to restore his spirits.

The arhat stood before a famous modern painting in which three nude women dance in a circle holding hands. Standing beside the painting, he seemed transformed into a flying dervish out of the Dunhuang Cave murals,⁶ and the memory of the arhat's abduction at Sapphire was swept aside without a trace.

"Are you . . . Meng Gang?" Cao Xuantian gathered his courage and approached.

The arhat turned his head to reveal a pair of blazing eyes, and Cao Xuantian hastily put himself out of the way of their two keen rays. "I've seen you dance, on stage," he remarked. The arhat's gaze became diffused with the suggestion of a smile, no longer sharp enough to cut, and Cao Xuantian saw that the man before him was of this world after all.

Meng Gang seemed born for the stage. The gallery's lighting accentuated his unusually imposing and spirited features, as if he was once more on stage gazing charmingly about him. He confessed immediately to being the lead dancer of the Beijing Dance Company and said that coming to New York to study dance had been just an

excuse. In fact, the whole dance scene here was far inferior to the Chinese system; the two were quite incomparable. "On the mainland, dance training isn't just training, it's hard labor! The foundations are laid as a young child, training every day, forcing a basic alteration in the body's shape. Nothing like the namby-pamby approach they have here."

In a flash, as if by the action of some evil spirit, the condensed milk-colored spots of the gallery's lights grew brighter, and Cao Xuantian's vision evaporated in pools of white, leaving him blinded. Meng Gang's Beijing accent seemed like a bell pealing at the end of a long string, the sound that reached him now distant, now close by. His estranged father's local accent seemed to sound again. "Little Tian, your Mandarin enunciation is awfully unclear." His brothers and sisters had all picked up their mother's Taiwanese accent, and when they spoke together Father became a lonely nation of one, while Mother's side thronged with people. But during the years when his school took part in the Mandarin Movement,⁷ Cao Xuantian used to brag to his classmates that his father spoke perfect Mandarin. When Father told him off with his faultless enunciation and rounded vowels for his own imperfect pronunciation, he'd secretly purse his lips to hide a smile, the sweetness in his heart like chewing candy. "Little Tian, your Mandarin's so poor that if one day Daddy takes you back to the old home on the mainland, Granddaddy's sure to laugh at you." Cao Xuantian had two elder brothers whose Mandarin was just as bad. He couldn't understand why Father only picked on him.

Father seemed to be saying something, a stream of words. Cao Xuantian shifted a little so that the shafts of light didn't sting his eyes so sharply, and the haze fell away. He saw Meng Gang's lively lips — what he'd been hearing was Meng Gang's voice all along. "Our dance institute is launching a new program soon, part of which I'm choreographing. It'll be quite interesting — you're welcome to come along."

They turned into an inner courtyard garden where, amazingly, in a cramped corner stood a row of jade bamboo so green it shone. It attracted little meandering, cool breezes that lent the place an appeal lacking in the air-conditioned interior. Upon asking him directly,

Cao Xuantian learned that they shared the same home region, the two places separated by a car ride of about half a day; Meng Gang had even occasionally passed his home village on the main road. Cao Xuantian hesitated, unsure whether his question was foolish. "Is it really . . . so very beautiful there?"

Meng Gang's rhetorical skills turned out to be unusually fine, and he wove together a string of novel adjectives so that a world of beautiful landscapes emerged layer by layer from his words. In his later years Father's words had been few and far between, and during his illness he often sat silently by himself, never leading one to imagine that the language of home could possess such lively eloquence.

The sun had slanted down a few inches, and the shadows grew cooler. Cao Xuantian took a deep breath; the sweet fragrance of the bamboo mingling with the moist smell of wet earth made his spirits soar and gave him an illusion of confidence. He hardened his resolve. "Actually, I saw you at Sapphire ages ago." Drops of water immediately clouded Meng Gang's vision, glittering brightly like a series of ripples on the water's surface. He pressed his lips together in a thin crescent, looked at Cao Xuantian, and laughed, two lively fishes leaping from the corners of his eyes.

"Comrade, how's it feel to go to bed with a compatriot from the fatherland?"

Meng Gang had recovered from his postejaculatory trance, and Cao Xuantian felt his voice in the tips of his hair, interrupting his drifting chain of memories. Meng Gang's profile turned front-on, his steady look imploring something of him.

Those words were too affected; Cao Xuantian knew they were a decoy. He burst out laughing, the movement pressing their chests momentarily together, and Cao Xuantian thought to himself, This guy's in good shape. Their lean bodies were like two shores, spare and angular, scraping up against each another.

"Don't laugh when I say this, but just now I kept thinking of a great river with a surging current in which I seemed to be floating along, hanging on to a piece of driftwood. I washed along with the

tide, floating down the Yellow River, and almost saw the yellow sands and grasslands on its banks, leading off into the far distance. Finally I think I floated to Heaven Mountain⁸ and melted with the icy waterway, in the end staggering along clogged with sand and silt." Cao Xuantian closed his eyes, recalling the unspeakably beautiful watery inn of a moment before.

Meng Gang threw him a sideways glance. "To hear you speak, one would think you'd been to the mainland yourself."

"I was a star student in geography—I can recite all the mainland's mountains, rivers, and products fluently." Cao Xuantian was proud of himself but immediately had cold water poured on him. Meng Gang's words were sharp as a knife. "I've been to those places, and they're really something! You haven't even seen them and you think you can go there inside of a book!"

Cao Xuantian turned over and stared hard into Meng Gang's eyes as though he meant to gouge them out. After a moment he said quietly, "I wish I could see what you've seen."

"You can, stupid. Taiwan allows you trips to the mainland to visit relatives now, doesn't it? When shall we meet in Beijing? I'll be your guide. Think it over—after all, we've already inaugurated the 'Three Links and Four Flows'⁹ all the way over here in New York."

The aptness of this final phrase dawned on both of them at the same moment and they burst out laughing. Meng Gang was obviously quite proud of his own serendipitous stroke of genius, and Cao Xuantian laughed till his lungs ached. Eventually the two fell silent, catching their breath. Glancing round the room Cao Xuantian noticed it was ridiculously luxurious.

Meng Gang explained casually that he lived with an American, and the furniture all belonged to his roommate; he lodged here independently. But when Cao Xuantian's gaze came to rest on a framed photo on the cabinet, it met with defeat. The bloodsucking old leech from the night at the bar stood with his face split by a grin, in apparent intimacy alongside Meng Gang at the wharf. His heart jumped, and he leapt up and dressed hurriedly, saying dully that he had to go. But Meng Gang insisted on taking him to eat in Chinatown, where he wanted to show him an authentic mainland restaurant.

On the way there, Cao Xuantian hardly spoke, sometimes even slowing his steps to fix his eyes on Meng Gang's form ahead of him. Meng Gang's pace quickened when he turned in to Chinatown, and after pushing his way past several pedestrians, he disappeared without a trace. Cao Xuantian stopped where he stood. As far as his eyes could see, almost all the people around him, pushing and shoving their way along, had black hair and yellow skin, and they seemed suddenly to turn into one single face. He felt a wave of panic; all the faces confused his vision, and he quickly shut his eyes. When he opened them, Meng Gang's helping hand touched his back. "Sly dog, keep up! You could really get lost here. When I first arrived in New York I lost myself in the subway once and got pretty panicked. Then I realized that since leaving Beijing, I was already lost in any case, so there actually was nothing to worry about." As they arrived at the market section, Meng Gang slackened his pace. Suddenly they were being jostled from all sides, and each took the opportunity to draw closer to the other.

The fishmongers had their bamboo baskets stacked on the sidewalk and the road was awash in dirty water flowing into a multitude of tiny rivers running in all directions. Customers stood about blocking the way, some fingering the produce, others haggling raucously with the fishmongers. The stink of sweat and fish overflowed the narrow walkway. Cao Xuantian stared with intrigue at a sort of miniature lobster, bright red like fire, of a kind he'd never seen in Taiwan. He was about to ask Meng Gang if they had these on the mainland when he noticed his impatient look and the signals he was sending with his eyes as he made way for them ahead. Together they forced an exit path and extricated themselves.

Once seated in the restaurant, Meng Gang rolled off their order to the waiter in his local accent, ordering the restaurant's specialty dishes, then let out a deep breath. "I very seldom come to Chinatown."

He sipped a mouthful of tea and stared out the window at the gradually darkening sky. The din of the street seeped in along with the fishy smell in the air. Meng Gang rubbed his nose. "When I was the company's lead dancer, I was given a huge room all to myself,

while others lived one couple to a tiny rat hole. At the time, I felt guilty about my special treatment. Then when I came overseas on tour with the company and saw that was how all the foreigners lived, I was angry: Why should I take on that guilt?" Sparks of saliva spat out with his words. "So I found a way to come out here. That business about studying at the institute isn't true. The real reason I came out was that I vowed never again to endure such hardship."

"So that's why you live with that foreigner?" At last Cao Xuantian put pressure on the knot in his heart.

"I guess you haven't ever really felt what—it—is—to—be—*poor*?" Meng Gang just about ground the word "poor" to pieces between his teeth as his eyes swept over several waiting staff, who stood about with their hands hanging at their sides. "A year ago I came to New York with just a few dollars to my name. I worked in a restaurant, but left after I had an argument with the boss. Back on the mainland I didn't even know what a wok looked like. Then six months ago I met Newman. We are . . . To each according to his needs."

Cao Xuantian dropped his head and gazed at the cup of tea. Although it had been poured a long time ago, it still gave off steam. But Meng Gang downed it boldly at a gulp, as if it didn't burn his mouth at all. Only then was his tone softened. "Tomorrow we'll go for a walk on the beach."

"Tell you a secret: I'm afraid of water."

Meng Gang just about spat out his mouthful of tea. "Isn't Taiwan an island? And you can't even *swim*?!" He roared with delight, impervious to the looks other diners cast their way. Cao Xuantian kicked his leg under the table, then began to laugh shamefacedly along with him.

To pad out the numbers for the beach outing, Cao Xuantian asked Mi along as well, and Mi brought his new darling, Peter. The four emerged from their clapped-out old car and set up camp in the gay area of Jones Beach. Peter was a typical American hunk with a pair of blue eyes that he fluttered at Mi, simply drooling over this tasty Chinese morsel. Mi's delicate hands, like fresh lotus roots, constantly caressed Peter's hairy chest. The two of them were as intimate as a potful of beef and potato stew.

Meng Gang watched this scene from the sidelines and commented with interest, "The two little ones seem quite close!"

Mi gestured with his lotus-fine fingers and replied heatedly, "We're the new production of *Romeo and Liang Shanbo*,¹⁰ unlike you — still stuck on that toothless old version of *The Butterfly Lovers*!"¹¹

Meng Gang gave him an exaggerated once-over, "Actually I think *Madame Butterfly* might be more your style."

Mi drew Cao Xuantian aside and rolled his eyes. "Where did you dig up this commie bandit?"¹² What a mouth — must be one too many criticism sessions!"¹³

"Hey — take it easy!"

"Ah, so the two sides have been fraternizing?"¹⁴ I guess I'm just an intractable old commie-hater."

Although Mi's words implied a cease-fire, his manner remained acerbic, and Cao Xuantian hastened to separate the two razor-tongued combatants, hurrying Meng Gang off for a walk.

After a few steps Meng Gang pulled a face as though he'd bitten into a hot chili. "That friend of yours is pretty cutting. He'd be a match for our Sichuan girls any day!"¹⁵

"It's all just words, he doesn't mean any harm. Actually his temper is understandable." Cao Xuantian turned to look at the ocean with its furious waves. "His old man in Taiwan is a government official, and all five of his brothers and sisters are successful — all except him, the deviant sibling. When his father found out he loved men, he spat out one single phrase: Raised in vain! Those were the final words he ever spoke to him. It broke Mi's spirit and he came out here to study. He says he'd die before going back. Lucky for him his mother takes it on herself to send him money."

Meng Gang gave a nasal *humph* and squatted down, digging his fingers into the sand. He picked up a handful and rubbed it hard between his hands until his palms turned a shocking red. "Same story! My father died young, and my elder brother, who's nearly thirty years older than me, became my surrogate father. One day he walked in on me and a guy from the dance company kissing in my room and was so mad he grabbed a vegetable knife and started bran-

dishing it at us. That night he knelt at the ancestral shrine the whole night long, weeping his apology to the ancestors. Ever since then he's treated me as a stranger."

Cao Xuantian looked at Meng Gang's spiky hair standing on end in the wind. His face had become that of a furious Jingang god, and Cao Xuantian couldn't think how he should respond. Luckily, Meng Gang quietly changed the subject. "It's a pity this ocean isn't the Pacific, otherwise our home would be just over there. Do you ever plan to go back to see your old home on the mainland?"

Six months earlier, Cao Xuantian had raised that idea with his two married brothers, but they'd shown no interest. He got the form to apply for a visa by himself, but then tore it up. To this day he couldn't understand why he'd done it. "I've thought about it, but—," he hesitated a moment, "I'm afraid..."

Catching him off guard, Meng Gang suddenly grabbed his hand and leapt into the waves as though he meant to drown himself, and before thoughts of escape could form in Cao's mind, he found himself falling into the yielding water bed. Immediately, seawater flooded his throat as though determined to irrigate his intestines. The claustrophobia of impending asphyxiation added to his terror of water, forming a thick rope that tied his hands and feet. Each time he roused his strength to struggle, it was like throwing his energy into a vast abyss where it soundlessly disappeared. With his head under water he heard nothing from the world of the living, only a peculiar, deathly stillness that came from the depths of the ocean and drew hideously closer and closer to his open mouth. His whole spine went numb, compounding his paralysis.

But even as he smelled the whiff of decay, there drifted over him a clean, fresh fragrance, and his whole body floated upward like a weightless feather. His heart filled with a wonderful, indescribable pressure. His thoughts trickled off into the distance, his mind a blank. He saw Father shaking his head, Father sighing, Father's look of disappointment winding toward him like a water snake. Father's lofty figure stood by the side of the swimming pool, Father said get into the water bravely like a boy, look how well your two brothers swim,

don't be scared. Father shook his head at his retreating form, Father looked at him with disappointment. He hid himself in the crowd, not daring to look back into Father's eyes.

Cao Xuantian opened his mouth underwater to scream, but no sound came out. Suddenly he felt a powerful force pulling him out. "Hey, are you all right?" He didn't hear Meng Gang's voice clearly at first, taking it for something out of his stream of memories. When he came round he was mad enough to hit him, but his energy was drained and he couldn't even stand without falling back into the water. Meng Gang held him tightly, his face all innocence as he said quickly, "This is what we call a strategic move, forcing the little pawn across the river to deal with this aquaphobia of yours."

Cao Xuantian's ruffled spirit calmed, and he thought with surprise of his final moments in the water. That was the first time he'd enjoyed the water's buoyancy, his whole body floating and weightless. In an instant, the indescribably painful burden he'd borne for years was gone. He fell weakly into the crook of Meng Gang's arm, extending the pleasure of weightless floating. He felt as he had when as a student he'd just passed the big five-kilometer-run test in sports class, or as he would after the excision of some swollen, watery tumor that had roiled day after day alongside his gallbladder.¹⁶

With Meng Gang leading and encouraging him, Cao Xuantian even floated again for a little while. The waves were big that day. Each one was like a mountain collapsing before his eyes, but surprisingly, Cao Xuantian was not afraid as he clutched Meng Gang's hand tightly through it all.

After coming ashore, Cao Xuantian got out of his sodden clothes and gave a nimble leap. The crowd was larger now, and several men were holding hands or kissing like lovers. Some even went naked, chasing the waves or turning somersaults, making a merry scene. Cao Xuantian couldn't believe his eyes, and Meng Gang laughed. "I was struck dumb the first time I came here, too—I'd never seen a sight like this in broad daylight." As he spoke he automatically reached for Cao Xuantian's hand. But Cao Xuantian reacted as if he'd been scalded and quickly pulled free. Meng Gang hadn't imagined his reaction would be so forceful and respectfully withdrew his hand.

But when Cao Xuantian reached for Meng Gang's hand he deftly concealed it.

"I'm sorry, I...actually I've always looked forward to the day when I could hold hands with someone in broad daylight," Cao Xuantian said despondently. "Just now I reacted almost unconsciously, I..."

"Don't worry, I understand. Taboos: It's all taboos making their mischief." Meng Gang threw himself into a handstand, propping himself on his hands and walking along a few steps on the sand. Through heavy breaths he said, "Before, on the mainland, seeing that everyone's life was equally hard, I thought hardship was truth. When I saw the Americans living like this my faith was utterly shattered. What is truth, in the end? Why are there two standards? Here the scene on this beach is acceptable, but would it be so in Beijing or Taipei?" He glanced up sideways and his forehead creased as he added with some difficulty, "What I see is a world up...side...down." He let his body fall freely to the sand like a mountain subsiding.

Just then a group of foreigners passed by and applauded noisily, yelling in appreciation. "Chinese kung fu? Encore!" Some even tried to mimic him, rolling clumsily about on the sand. Cao Xuantian shook his head and laughed bitterly. "Look at those Americans, so happy over nothing at all."

When the two returned, Mi was giving Peter a massage, kneading so hard that Peter emitted feeble little cries. Mi laughed and pinched him, letting fly with a torrent of words. "What is this, Liang escorting Zhu down the mountain?¹⁷ Get a load of the pair of you with your gloomy faces."

As expected, Mi was unimpressed with Meng Gang. After their beach trip, quicker than a flash he began scouting for a different mate for Cao Xuantian, starting in with the same old tune, stepping up his attacks on Cao's rejection of the Western for the Chinese. Cao Xuantian thought Mi was taking the whole thing too far, but at the same time he worried Mi might run off at the mouth and say something rude to Meng Gang. In the end he resigned himself to the date Mi had arranged.

Mi was well armed this time. According to him, Simon was the

handpicked cream of the crop. If he wasn't such a hopeless case of "oriental fever," and not to Mi's taste, he'd have kept him for himself.

Simon had refined good looks, tall and slim, with wheat-gold hair in a ponytail hanging down his back. He was dressed in a loose white cotton robe that gave him the air of some Chinese divinity, a kind of beauty that sat awkwardly on him. Cao Xuantian realized immediately that Simon's knowledge and love of the East put him in a class of his own.

His green eyes seemed like two overflowing jade pools as he said in perfect Mandarin, "I do prefer dark hair and eyes; they seem full of mystery and wisdom." He paused, then added, "Yet Buddhism instructs us not to become ensnared by appearances, does it not?" Although Mi had told him Simon could speak Chinese, when he heard him suddenly speak like this, Cao Xuantian was slightly shocked. Simon went on to quote from the Buddhist sutras, declaiming resoundingly as though reciting some memorized formula. Cao Xuantian was momentarily stunned into silence.

The conversation then turned to traditional Chinese poetry, and Cao Xuantian thought he'd at last have some leeway to respond. Little did he know that Simon had spent two years on the Chinese mainland. He proceeded fluently to rattle off Du Fu's "My Former Abode" and Wang Wei's "The Deer Enclosure."¹⁸ When with a far-away, lofty air he began to recite "Journey to The Red Crag,"¹⁹ the look in his eyes was like the tossing, mist-covered waters of the Yangtze, now rising, now falling. Suddenly Cao Xuantian's cheeks were on fire and all the nerves in his body seemed locked in wild battle with one another. He simply couldn't sit still, so he made up some excuse and hastily took his leave.

Simon's face, so full of yearning, seemed to pursue him relentlessly along the street, driving him into an anxious search for some place of refuge where he might escape it. The chaotic New York buildings stood against a dark, threatening sky as if about to fall down on his head. Panicked, he stood at an intersection, unable to think where he should go and utterly oblivious to the needles of rain that were beginning to fall.

Seized with a sudden impulse to grab a passerby, just to have

someone to talk to, he stared in agitation at face after stranger's face as they flowed heedlessly past him like a rapid stream. He strode desperately on, with the city gazing coldly down on his scuttling flight.

He walked into a little park on a traffic island. All around, homeless people gazed at him blankly, until the rain began to fall more heavily and they all moved to take shelter under the tree where he stood. He drew back, besieged by them, their long-unwashed clothes giving off a foul stench that tied him down like an invisible net. A drunk with breath reeking of alcohol spat out, "Chinese?" His stomach turned and he was ready to vomit as he escaped into the rain.

The thick streams of rain converged to form a hazy white curtain of water, now near, now far away. Washed out to a dead gray, the street seemed to disappear. Cao Xuantian wandered without any sense of direction through streets awash with trickling streams. He had no idea how long he'd been walking when he glanced at a street sign and found he wasn't far from Meng Gang's place.

It was the old guy, Newman, who answered when he rang at the door. Cao Xuantian wiped away the water that clouded his eyes and revealed a hostile expression. Newman told him Meng Gang had just gone out and would be back soon, and insisted he come in out of the rain. Struck with the strange idea that he would like thoroughly to scrutinize this benefactor of Meng Gang's, he followed him indoors.

Newman wore a purple sports shirt that clung tightly to his torso, highlighting a figure that was more or less in shape and might just be considered muscular. However, on top of his head the greater part of the territory was bald beyond hope of recovery. Thanking him for the towel he offered, Cao Xuantian was careful to maintain his guard, taking on an almost adversarial stance toward Newman. His face was what irritated him most: Constantly wreathed in smiles, it revealed no chink in his armor. The blood-colored smile appeared again. "You've been to Sapphire. I saw you there. I never miss anything good looking." As his hand rested on the back of the chair he seemed once again like an agitated octopus in search of food. His eyeballs bulged, wantonly flashing their green rays as he contemplated his prey.

Cao Xuantian caught sight of a Chinese bonsai in the corner. Half its leaves were pale yellow, making a discordant contrast with the colored glaze of the character for “longevity” that was painted on the pot. Newman followed his gaze and picked up the plant—apparently a little cypress—and said with a shrug, “Such a pity, I can never get these bonsais to grow.”

Just then Meng Gang came in holding a big shopping bag, completely soaked down one side. At first his expression was one of shock, but he soon recovered his poise and remarked, “Wow, it’s really pouring out there.” The three found themselves groping for words as the room filled with an awkward silence that the pitter-patter of the rain did nothing to fill.

Newman made no effort to conceal his desires, and his eyes flashed back and forth like before, showing his obvious interest in both men. He walked over to touch Meng Gang’s shoulder. “It’s not every day you have a friend visit. Let’s all go out to that French restaurant we went to last time. Would the two handsome gentlemen enjoy that?”

Cao Xuantian’s sharp eyes spied the five-fingered octopus creeping along Meng Gang’s shoulder. Every hair on his head prickled and he couldn’t suppress a shudder. In an instant he stood up, coldly declined the invitation, opened the door, and fled out into the rain.

Meng Gang grabbed an umbrella and went after him. Cao Xuantian walked with his head bowed as though counting the drowned neon signs in the puddles on the ground. Big fat raindrops dripped from his hair, and his weeping face was a sheet of white reflecting the glimmering lights.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Meng Gang said.

Breathing in the rain in his nostrils, Cao Xuantian choked slightly. “I think you’re letting him . . . keep you, and I don’t believe you enjoy this kind of life. He was even coming on to me. With someone like that, how could you . . .”

Meng Gang stopped walking. A gust of wind turned his umbrella inside out and he flung it down so that the two of them stood facing each other in the rain. The raindrops falling into Cao Xuantian’s eyes made them raw, and he squeezed them shut for a second. Meng

Gang stood with his head held high, like a post standing tall in the river of rain. Looking at him, Cao felt his heart soften. "If you don't like him, then leave him. I—when I go back to Taiwan I can earn more money and send it to you. It's not worth it—."

Meng Gang cut him off sharply. "What's the difference between taking your money and taking his?"

Cao Xuantian's tone grew righteous. "Of course it's different. We're each other's people—compatriots."

Meng Gang gazed scornfully at him for a long moment, then gave a strange laugh. "Each other's people? You'd better wake up from that China dream of yours, and fast. I'm warning you, don't displace your nostalgia for the mainland onto me. Open your eyes and take a good look: Is it me you like, or is it the China I stand for, the homeland? I left the mainland to rid myself of that ancient burden—and now you want to push me back there, back into that prison." His grief and resentment inflected his words so that they sounded like a tune played on an *erhu*.²⁰ "Whether Newman loves me or not means nothing to me. I've just learned to play the game by their rules. We owe each other nothing. But you—," he faltered and couldn't go on. He turned on his heel and walked rapidly away, his black silhouette in the buffeting wind and rain becoming a solitary bird in flight.

Cao Xuantian's eyes followed the bird through the curtains of rain as it flew along the ground, farther and farther away. The image seemed familiar, and he remembered that the same bird had flown ten years ago in the sky above Mount Fuzhou in Taipei. "The time is correct; raise the coffin; lower it to rest in the earth!" The *fengshui*²¹ master had ascertained the right moment and instructed the bearers to lift the coffin and place it in the hole, then cover it over with earth. "Mr. Cao is a man of Hebei province. At this the auspicious hour are cremated one prosperous house, two faithful servants..." At that instant the ceremonial colored paper house, and Father's black suit with it,²² caught fire with a bright flame. It burned fast, the back and front burning through immediately. Suddenly the ash corpse of the suit floated up, hovering upward on the wind, like a lost bird flapping its wings in panic, then finally, at a distance, turning a circle.

The drenching of the previous night caused a few side effects.

Over the next few days, Cao Xuantian developed a fever that made his head vague and heavy. But the rest of the symptoms were a little unusual. His body felt vacant, as if it had been emptied right out, as though his skeleton were made of balloons that had suddenly deflated, making him an empty husk and causing him awful, incessant torment. Ten years earlier, when Father had died, he had also fallen seriously ill. After that he'd almost forgotten the misery of sickness, but now he experienced it once more.

While he was ill he thought about Taiwan for the first time since arriving in New York, his thoughts jumbled and incoherent. He had left Taiwan out of fear that staying would only keep his grief fresh in his mind and had applied for leave without pay, hoping that moving far away would help him disentangle himself from his spent emotions. Gradually Taiwan grew into an emotional complex: Everything associated with the place became untouchable, a prohibited area in his memory. But now he found that the heart-wrenching pain of the past seemed at some point to have transformed into merely a closed file of no further importance. He began to deeply miss his home in Taiwan. He called the airline and moved up the date of his departure, then, after some hesitation, dialed Meng Gang's number. Newman's recorded voice sounded on the answering machine, and he left a message in Mandarin, basically a farewell.

He decided to fight the illness without seeing a doctor or taking drugs, and over the days that followed he developed a hunger for suffering that bordered on self-punishment. He even wished for the virus to win a few rounds. With light, floating steps he wandered at random through Manhattan, and the physical pain led to a strange alteration in his emotional state. For a long time the mysterious pressure in his heart had been quietly slipping away like sand in an hourglass.

Finally, he understood that he had never really forgiven himself for not daring to look his father in the eye as death approached. His father's eyes had exhausted themselves trying to make contact, until finally they closed in loneliness. Father's eyes were forever asking something from him. His eldest brother had done poorly at school and ended up in the army, and his next eldest brother had fallen in

love with a girl from the south and insisted on going to work far from home. Again and again he saw the forlorn hurt in his father's eyes, until it seemed he lived only to please those eyes. As he gradually became sure of his homosexuality, he knew that no matter how brilliantly he'd done in his studies, no matter how highly his character was praised by others, all his previous efforts were in vain. Father's eyes only reminded him of his guilt and remorse. He even began to feel that he was somehow to blame for Father's never having returned to the homeland he yearned for his whole life long, the regret for which he carried to his deathbed.

Continuing his wandering, he took no notice of his feet, which had now lost all feeling, just like this cold stranger of a city where nobody noticed he'd walked up and down this same street scores of times. The unfamiliar street scene brought the past perfectly into focus so that it seemed like yesterday. He probed mercilessly at the truth he'd never dared to face: When his father died he had felt freed of a heavy burden. Probing further, he even uncovered an all but imperceptible feeling of joy. Had Father lived longer, he would sooner or later have had to get married and produce a son, or else be forced into a showdown. Added to that was the way Father always made him share responsibility for his own hopeless nostalgia. Never during the past ten years had Cao Xuantian dared admit to himself that he felt this way. Now that the truth was out in the open, he felt as if a great boulder had dropped away from his heart.

Cao Xuantian wandered around until midnight before stumbling back to find the shadow of a person at his front step. Just as he was thinking his eyes were playing tricks on him, Meng Gang's words shot out, swift as an arrow. "Your message had me worried and angry. Kid, I could flatten you!" In the moonlight his face glowed with anger, his mouth a cutout moon shadow. "You ran away from Taiwan to come here, and now you're in such a hurry to run back. How long can you keep running away? Did you plan not to see me again? Leave like this, and forget me?"

"In any case, we're doomed." Cao Xuantian's voice was thick and nasal from his cold.

"Why must you be so fatalistic? I really can't stand the way

you—.” Meng Gang stopped short, waving his hand impatiently. “Whatever you’re given, you take. There’s no such fucking thing as destiny in this world. You just have to keep getting up and trying again; keep getting up to fight. The moment you give in, you’ve lost. I won’t let you go back early, you have to stay, stay until the proper time. At least you’ve got to see my new dance program.” He drew out these last words on purpose to increase their effect. “It’s really something. If you miss it you’re doomed to regret it for the rest of your days.”

Cao Xuantian let out a laugh, but Meng Gang’s frozen expression didn’t change. “It’s hard enough for an ordinary man and woman to be together in this world, let alone the two of us, both men. There are enough obstacles as it is, but you insist on creating this bizarre situation, making things harder for yourself!” As he spoke he took out a small cardboard box from his pocket, and his tone softened. “You don’t look well. Your voice sounds congested. After that day in the rain, I was sick for a few days, too. I took this powdered stuff from the mainland. It works pretty well—here.”

Cao Xuantian reached out his hand. The cardboard of the medicine box was coarse and slightly warm in his hand from the heat of Meng Gang’s body. “Have you been waiting long?”

“Not an eternity, but long enough. I haven’t even eaten. I’m so hungry my eyes are swimming. I rushed out in such a hurry I even forgot my wallet.” Meng Gang shot him a dissimulating look.

“Let’s go. I know a little Taiwanese place just round the corner. I guess you won’t object to eating what you can get with my small change—you’re not going to start in with another tirade?” Cao Xuantian blinked at him.

“Why you little—!” Meng Gang laughed at last, and gave him a thump.

Cao Xuantian began to feel much better after just two doses of the medicine. It smelled of licorice, a fragrance he loved, which roused him and cleared his head. Excitedly, he tried several times to call Mi; finally his call was answered by Mi’s foreign lover. His tone wasn’t

overly polite, and only after persistent questioning by Cao Xuantian did he unwillingly tell him that Mi had attempted suicide and was in the hospital. He relayed this news as though reading out some newspaper article utterly unconnected with him, then abruptly hung up the phone.

Cao was mystified that someone like Mi would want to die; it came as an absolute bolt from the blue. He had difficulty finding the hospital but at last found himself wandering the corridors. Only after finding his way to the most remote wing did he locate Mi's ward. Actually, it was more like a storeroom—a tiny nook with four beds crammed into it, three of which were occupied by black people. Cao Xuantian caught sight of Mi lying in the farthest corner, one leg hanging encased in an enormous plaster cast. He looked terribly feeble next to the immense white shadow of the cast.

Cao Xuantian walked quietly over and gently touched the back of Mi's hand where it rested on the edge of the bed. "Why did you do it?"

As soon as Mi saw him the stagnant pools of his eyes shot sparks of life, and his voice rose from a parched throat. "Yesterday I had a big fight with him and he got mad and left and refused to speak to me. I was so mad I grabbed something to throw after him, and I threw it too hard and fell off the balcony."

"So why did he say you tried to commit suicide?"

"He—he says I jumped on purpose to let him see me die."

"Lucky you only broke your leg. At least you're alive. You scared me half to death!" Cao Xuantian adjusted the venetian blind, brightening the room considerably, and he felt his shaken heart settle back in place. But Mi began to sob. "I wish I *had* died. Do you know why we were fighting? We both have regular blood tests, and this time mine came back positive. I was scared sick. I'd thought he'd find a way to help me. Who'd have thought he'd turn on me and tell me to get out, and break it off with me? When those foreigners play, they're brave as anything, but the minute they hear the word AIDS they'd kick out their own father!" His tears overflowed and streamed down his face. "Even Peter's too scared to come and see me; now no one dares..."

"Are you going to tell your family?"

"No! I'd rather die than have them see me like this!" Mi's sobbing became slightly hysterical. A little panicked, Cao Xuantian tried to comfort him with gentle words, his own eyes becoming moist. Mi continued to cry a while; then his breathing calmed somewhat, and eventually he slept. Cao Xuantian gazed in silence at his tearstained face and felt a sudden cold shiver as if the dark spirit of death were lingering close by. He couldn't suppress a shudder.

The situation put him in a quandary, but in the end he made up his mind to tell Mi's family. When Mi's mother asked after her son he found it hard to go on, but finally the words came out. Mi's mother began to sob on the other end of the line. "Ah that child, that child of my bitter fate. When he left the country out of anger with his father, I knew that sooner or later something was bound to go wrong. His father's words were harsh, but he could never truly reject his own child. I'll prepare to come and bring the child home."²³

When Mi woke up, Cao Xuantian told him about the phone call. Mi's expression turned to fury and he opened his mouth wide as if to bite. "I said I'll die before going back!" He kept repeating the words over and over, creating a great commotion until the black man in the next bed roared in protest. Mi gradually calmed down, like a rag doll put neatly back in its place. Slowly he opened his mouth and spoke in a voice that was barely audible, as if he were speaking to himself. "I'm sorry. Maybe this is best. I've wanted to see my mother for a long time now."

On his way home Cao Xuantian kept thinking about how just as he was leaving, Mi had called him back and stammered, "I'm afraid!" He thought about that helpless face trapped in the darkness of the ward with no hope of escape.

Over the days that followed, Cao Xuantian visited Mi daily. He'd been transferred to another ward and started on a course of specialized treatment, and although the new ward was a little better than the last, in that bright, orderly prison, visitors weren't allowed to stay long. Mi was in a highly nervous state, walking a tightrope on the brink of collapse. Twice Cao Xuantian saw him suffer a fit. The medical staff held down his writhing body and pricked him viciously

with a needle. Instantly Mi's eyes, rolling in terror, became like a brightly burning candle flame suddenly doused to an ember. It was an extremely disturbing scene, and it played itself over and over again in Cao Xuantian's mind.

Neither Mi's live-in lover nor Peter ever showed their faces. But Meng Gang, though busy with preparations for his upcoming performance, made the time to pay Mi a visit. Cao Xuantian had warned him beforehand to watch his words, but still he spoke out with no thought for the consequences. "Don't look so miserable, the two of you! Carriers of the virus don't necessarily become ill." He even joked that he'd like to sign Mi's leg cast as a memento. Mi's spirits made a miraculous upturn as he sparred verbally with Meng Gang, unwilling to show him his vulnerability. Cao Xuantian, covered in cold sweat from the outset, saw it had been a false alarm.

Mi's mother, a delicate, graceful woman, arrived promptly in New York accompanied by Mi's second eldest sister. Her face was haggard as a dehydrated flower. Mi grew more emaciated daily and faint blue rings appeared around his eyes. He was like a toy that lay discarded in the street: although the bright colors of yesterday were still visible, the outer coat of paint had faded. When he saw his mother he couldn't speak, and his whole body was wracked with endless convulsions as though he were being electrocuted. Once again he suffered the needle.

Mi's mother stoically held back her tears, but the moment she turned away from Mi, her face was bathed in tears that fell like rain. Leaving the ward, she covered her face and thanked Cao Xuantian. She put her arm around his shoulders as though he were of her own family and told him, "His old man is hard. He says this sickness brings shame. He refuses to let him come home, insists he stay here for treatment so nobody will find out. What time is this to worry about losing face? I must take him back to Taiwan. My own child—for good or ill he will stay by my side."

After handing Mi over to his family, Cao Xuantian had planned on taking a good, long rest, but he found he couldn't sleep. He kept wanting to ask Mi: Had he fallen by accident that night, or did he really want to end his life? Perhaps at that moment it was all much

the same to him, but Cao Xuantian couldn't help pondering Meng Gang's words—"You just have to keep fighting. The moment you give in, you've lost!"

When Cao Xuantian entered the theater and read the program on the opening night of Meng Gang's mysterious new dance performance, he got a pleasant surprise. He'd never guessed that the arhat would dance *Nuozha*, a Chinese folk tale that had entranced him since childhood.²⁴

He took his seat in the dress circle amid the crowd of golden-haired, green-eyed men and women. His secret love affair with the lead dancer, expressed only in the silent understanding that existed between them, made him feel an inviolable bond that united them through good and ill. In a way he even felt tonight's performance would not be Meng Gang's feat alone, but that they would both be performing together through Meng Gang's body.

The curtain rose amid Chinese music. A man and a woman danced the male and female principles, creating the ten thousand things from yin and yang. Now the couple danced a lover's duet. Passion shone in their eyes and they joined hands in love in a scene of marital harmony between Nuozha's father and mother.

Next, the female dancer performed a solo, stepping forward only to circle back again in a perfect expression of the joy and anxiety of a human mother. Nuozha's gestation period was unusually long, but at last the fruit fell from the vine. Meng Gang took the stage. He wore a plain white mask and held a huge banner that waved and billowed like clouds and wind; one saw only his resolution as he stood tall on the earth and pointed up toward the heavens. The music swelled. In the background dropped a huge screen painted with a map of the underworld from the Yuli Almanac.²⁵ Nuozha then despoiled the Palace of the Dragon King, increasing the sense of his tragic heroism.

Cao Xuantian felt his heart quake when the story reached the part where Nuozha commits the ultimate crime and his father disowns him.²⁶ Nuozha then cuts his bones to return to his father and carves his flesh to return to his mother.²⁷ Meng Gang strode out of

the wings onto the stage and removed his white mask to reveal his face, now suffused with a furious glow, then peeled back his black shirt to expose his naked chest. From behind his back he pulled out a red satin streamer; it stretched out longer and longer as he walked to the center of the stage, and soared and shivered in midair like a gurgling river of blood.

Nuozha's body, bathed in blood, was transformed into a lotus: Meng Gang stood on one foot like a crane, becoming a slender, elegant flower. On his face Cao Xuantian saw the determination to remain forever estranged, never to return. With a start he remembered that look: When Meng Gang had stared off into the distance at Jones Beach, and when he'd cut short Cao's own nostalgia the day of the rainstorm, his face had worn that same expression.

Cao Xuantian, too, was affected by the power of that immense force, and despite his fear, he couldn't shake the feeling of unity he had with Meng Gang. He could only continue to savor the feeling of dancing along with him, entering into Nuozha's successive transmigrations and into Meng Gang's attempts to tear free of his own umbilical cord. He seemed to feel in his own body the agony of cutting his bones and carving his flesh for the sake of his parents.

After the performance, Cao Xuantian waited at the backstage exit as they'd arranged. Meng Gang appeared sooner than expected and grabbed him, starting to run and laughing. "Hurry, they want me to stay on to celebrate!"

They ran to Greenwich Village. Some remnant face powder still clung to the hair at Meng Gang's temples, and Cao Xuantian brushed it away. Meng Gang said excitedly, "Just now on stage I had an inspiration—I thought of something I want to give you. Don't worry, it doesn't cost anything. It's purely a keepsake."

Cao Xuantian thought to himself, "Actually, you've already given me a great gift."

He hadn't quite recovered from his shaken state after seeing the performance, and when he spoke his voice was rather uneven. "Watching you on stage just now, I thought of something, too. I decided I will go back to see my old home on the mainland. Even if

what I see isn't what I've imagined, that can only shatter my father's dream, not mine. Whether it's a beautiful dream or a nightmare, it's time it was laid to rest."

His voice rising in excitement, Meng Gang said, "Okay then, I want to take a trip to Taiwan as well. There's someone I like there—that's reason enough." But hearing this, Cao Xuantian hesitated. "I think right now they only allow visits from eminent persons from the mainland."

Meng Gang's voice fell momentarily. "Eminent? Then I've still got a long way to go."

Cao Xuantian caught his elbow. "Hey, it's been forty years already, what's three or four more years' wait? Just hurry up and become eminent!"

Meng Gang's face took on a solemn expression of deep thought, which was gradually replaced by the excited look of someone hatching a plan. "I'm not going to dance any more. I want to go behind the scenes. Before, when I was choreographing, I traveled all over the mainland and saw all kinds of folk dances. The more I saw and the further into it I got, on the one hand my respect for the people increased, but on the other hand the more I hated China's backwardness. I was very conflicted. Right now I'm thinking about putting together a large-scale dance piece. I want to bring out a new kind of Chinese dance." And he began to dance as if there were nobody around, quickly forgetting all inhibition and using the sidewalk as his stage.

Cao Xuantian caught sight of a gushing fire hydrant by the roadside and impulsively ran over to scoop up a handful of water and fling it out. Meng Gang followed with a shout and struggled with him over the water source, and they wound up having a water fight right there in the middle of the street.

After they had wrung out their clothes, they crossed Christopher Street. This was New York City's biggest gay district, and wave after wave of women and men streamed toward them, clearly differentiated into separate groups. Many same-sex lovers held hands without attracting the slightest bit of attention from passersby. Suddenly Cao

Xuantian took Meng Gang's hand. Meng Gang cried out in delight, "Ah, now all's right in heaven and earth!"

This public hand-holding felt like the most private joy, and it stayed in Cao Xuantian's mind until several days later, when he flew back to Taiwan. He opened the gift Meng Gang had given him with instructions that it was to be opened only after he'd boarded the aircraft. Inside the cardboard box was a patch of dazzling red: Nuozha's satin streamer, folded and pressed flat. The satin was warm to the touch, as though Meng Gang had given him all the blood in his body as a memento.

He thought of the night they had spent together on the bank of the Hudson River, two days before he left. The waters were vast and the surface of the river reflected the moon at the center of the sky, confounding all sense of direction. He had said that when he went home to Taiwan, they would once again be like two stones on the shore, gazing at each other across the sea, able to meet only when the sea dried up. Meng Gang had given a bright laugh and said, "Look what you're missing by not being able to swim. If it weren't for that, you could dive under the water and take a look, and you'd find that even though these two stones on the shore lie on opposite banks, beneath the sea the land is all one."

Is the world under the sea really so wonderful? Cao Xuantian decided the first thing he'd do when he arrived in Taiwan was learn to swim. Then he could dive into the ocean and see for himself.

NOTES

1. *Mengpotang*, translated here as "Soup of Forgetting," causes souls to forget past lives before they are reincarnated. *Trans.*

2. An arhat (Ch: *luohan*) is a disciple of Buddhism who has achieved individual enlightenment. Statues or paintings of arhats seated serenely in meditation are frequently found in Buddhist temples in China, Tibet, and India. *Trans.*

3. Taipei's New Park is Taiwan's best-known male cruising area. *Trans.*

4. In Chinese, "eating finger" refers to the index finger. There is a clear double entendre intended here. *Trans.*

5. This refers to the map of China. *Trans.*

6. The Dunhuang Caves, located in the desert of Gansu province in northwestern China, are famous for the ancient Buddhist paintings and sculptures that adorn their walls. *Trans.*

7. The Mandarin Movement (Guoyu Yundong) was a movement encouraged by the KMT government during the 1960s to reward the use of standard Mandarin and discourage the use of Taiwanese or Minnan dialect. *Trans.*

8. Heaven Mountain, or Tianshan, is in Xinjiang Province in far northwest China. *Trans.*

9. "Three Links and Four Flows" refers to a policy set in place by Beijing in 1981 toward Taiwan's reunification with the mainland. The "Three Links" to be worked toward are direct trade, postal, and travel links; the "Four Flows" refers to economic, cultural, technological, and sporting exchanges. *Trans.*

10. Liang Shanbo is the masculine lead of a Chinese opera, *Liang Shanbo yu zhu yingtai* (Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, or Love Eterne). The opera, which has been the subject of several film adaptations, is based on a legend in which a young woman from a wealthy family, Zhu Yingtai, dresses as a man in order to pursue her studies in Hangzhou. There she falls in love with the scholar Liang Shanbo, who initially takes her for a boy. Because Liang is from a poor family, Zhu's parents forbid the pair to marry and the affair ends in tragedy with both Zhu and Liang committing suicide. After Zhu's death, though, the lovers are magically transformed into butterflies and can at last be together. The gender play of the story itself is heightened by the fact that it exists in operatic form as both a *yueju* and a *koa-a-hi*, forms of opera from southern China and Taiwan respectively, in which all parts are played by women. Thus, the actress playing Liang Shanbo is a woman playing a man falling in love with a boy who is actually a girl; the actress playing Zhu Yingtai is a woman playing a girl playing a boy. In Hsu's story, Mi imagines a further twist in which the hero of the opera, Liang Shanbo, is paired with Romeo from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, symbolizing his own liaison with the American man, Peter. *Trans., with thanks to Ellie Zhang and Teri Silvio.*

11. *The Butterfly Lovers* (*Liang zhu*) is a violin concerto based on the story of *Liang Shanbo yu zhu yingtai* (see previous note). It is probably the most frequently recorded piece of Chinese music, and as such connotes a certain sense of Chinese cultural nationalism—hence Mi's citation of it to refer to Cao Xuantian's preference for a Chinese lover. Owing to its extreme and

long-running popularity, the concerto is also arguably something of a musical cliché, and Mi's critical comment about Cao's choice of partner also carries this edge. *Trans.*

12. The phrase "commie bandit" (*gongfei*) was often used in martial law-period Taiwan to refer to mainland Chinese. The phrase used here is a related one: *feihu*. *Trans.*

13. "Criticism sessions" refers to the meetings, instituted in mainland China under Mao, to assess workers' political attitudes. *Trans.*

14. "Two sides" here implies the two sides of the Taiwan strait: the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China on Taiwan. *Trans.*

15. According to folk legend, women from Sichuan province are particularly hot-tempered—possibly by association with Sichuan's spicy cuisine. *Trans.*

16. The gallbladder is associated with courage. *Trans.*

17. This is another reference to the opera *Liang shanbo yu zhu yingtai*. As Meng and Cao return, Mi compares the scene to the scene in that opera where Liang escorts Zhu down the mountain. The two are pained by their imminent parting as Zhu must return to her family's home. *Trans.*

18. Du Fu (712–770) and Wang Wei (701–761) are Tang dynasty poets. *Trans.*

19. The poem is by the Song dynasty poet Su Dongpo (eleventh century). The Red Crag (Chibi) is in Hebei province and was the scene of a legendary battle in the third century. *Trans.*

20. The *erhu* is a traditional Chinese two-stringed bowed instrument. *Trans.*

21. *Fengshui* is the Chinese art of geomancy. *Trans.*

22. This refers to the paper house burned for Mr. Cao for use in the after-life. *Trans.*

23. Mi's mother speaks local Minnan language ("Taiwanese") rather than Mandarin. *Trans.*

24. The legend of Nuozha tells of a supernatural child born to Li Jing, one of the Lords of Heaven. The Third Prince Nuozha repeatedly enraged his father by becoming involved in fierce conflicts with Long Wang (Dragon King), the God of the Sea. Finally Nuozha killed himself by disemboweling in order symbolically to "return his bones to his father and his flesh to his mother," that is, to signify his repentance for his crimes and to demonstrate publicly that his parents were innocent of involvement. Even this, however, failed to please Li Jing. Finally Nuozha was given eternal life in the form of

a lotus by the priest whose pupil he had been in life. Nuozha is notorious within Chinese mythology as a rebel who challenged the traditional ideal of filial piety by defying his father's authority. *Trans.*

25. The Yuli Almanac is a book of folk Buddhism. *Trans.*

26. Nuozha's ultimate crime is his wounding of the Dragon King. *Trans.*

27. See note 24 above.

THE BOY IN THE PINK ORCHID TREE



LIN YUYI

Lin Yuyi (b. 1963) is the author of three short-story collections to date, *I Love Eileen Chang* (1992), from which this story is taken, *Love Life* (1992), and *Stars Singing on the Mountain* (1998). All of Lin's collections contain pieces with themes of same-gender eroticism, and his gay coming-of-age narratives, infused with a wistful nostalgia for central and southern Taiwan in the 1970s, have been read avidly by male *tongzhi* readerships over the past decade. This story has been anthologized in Yang Zongrun's collection *Searching for Him in the Crowd*, the first in Gay Sunshine's series of collections of contemporary *tongzhi* fiction in Chinese.¹

This engaging tale, set in martial law-period Taiwan, is notable for the classical-style lyricism and humor of its treatment of life at a boys' school, in contrast to the more experimental styles of many of the other stories collected in this volume. In his commentary on this story in Yang's anthology, Lin states that its major theme is the hypocrisy of the boys' beloved teacher, Wang Daren. At the end of the story, however, the narrator himself is left in

an ambiguous and rather interesting position vis-à-vis normative sexuality. This is not only because now, years later, he remains strangely troubled by his memories of the relationships between himself, his school friend, and their teacher, but also because as a scholar of literary Chinese, he has in a sense fulfilled his teenage ambition to become “Wang Daren the second.”



Sometimes memory is like a beast: You can't control it, it just insists on taking its own direction. And that's precisely why I like to reminisce about the past: to try my skill at taming it. Every few years or months I return to a few particular incidents, following memory's footprints, trying to find the truth and significance behind the events. Of course that takes a great deal of concentration, and sometimes it turns out to be a waste of time. Some incidents are very clear in your mind, yet you find it difficult to place them chronologically and the plots and characters merge together in a dim, chaotic mass of riddles. But with other incidents you need only think of them, and instantly you remember the time when they occurred and the particular atmosphere, colors, smells, voices, and sensations of that time. What I'm going to tell is one of those vivid, spirited stories. Among the herd of beasts that are my memories, this story is the most savage and bloodthirsty of all. You can see the string of scars across my forehead—they're the result of my efforts to tame it, but I've never succeeded.

I was attending high school at an illustrious boys' school in the island's central region. If you, too, had been in that central city and had walked by the towering gray outer wall of our school, you would likely have heard the sound of lessons being read aloud. The voices would have been rough and husky, conveying the innocence of adolescence. It was a prestigious school, and we had special privileges that aroused the jealousy of students at other schools. For example, if at morning assembly we found the headmaster's speech a little too

long or otherwise disagreeable, we could justifiably raise an uproar and boo him off the stage. It was a tradition. Each headmaster served only a four-year term, but the tradition stretched way back to the days of Japanese rule. Even if it made him blue in the face, he had to step down from the stage and bow, left with no choice but to admit defeat. To take another example, we were allowed to grow our hair longer than others; I even heard of some students whose hair was so long they had to brush it with a comb. In those days, when long hair was forbidden and boys generally had to cut their hair right off, this was most controversial. These special privileges added an extra luster to the haloes over our heads. It seems adults have the strange idea that no matter how bad a student from a good school may be, he's always a little better than a student from a bad school. This is a dangerous way of thinking, but many people hold to it with unwavering faith. In my experience the boys at our school who scored high marks in the university entrance exam were just the same as the other boys, all suffering painfully through the awkwardness of adolescence. Being tied down hand and foot by those cold, hard desks and chairs was unbearable. Our attention often wandered from the blackboard toward the exuberant spring outside the window, where the orchid tree was blooming wonderfully in a mist of pink flowers. There were also a few precocious students who'd take any chance they got to run a bit wild, mildly challenging the school rules as a way of releasing their inner restlessness. The protagonist of this story, A'Mo, was the number-one archetype of this kind of character.

A'Mo was on the school volleyball team. He'd grown up good and tall; reaching up with his arms he could touch the fluorescent lights that hung from the ceiling. At that time I only came up to his nipples, but you must realize I was very robust, with good, strong arms. I'd been on the school baseball team since middle school; if I'd been a bit taller, there's no way I'd have missed selection for the basketball or volleyball team. But I was only 160 centimeters, and for that reason was stuck permanently on the number three voluntary baseball team. Every day, wearing my red baseball cap, I watched enviously as people practiced basketball and volleyball. Of course there were also some tender little devils who greatly envied that red baseball cap

of mine, like my kid brother Pickled Egg. But notice I call them “little devils,” and that’s what they were. A truly grown-up boy will invariably discard the little white ball and develop a mania for basketball and volleyball. But since my height of 160 prevented me from moving onward to the other sports fields, I dimly sensed that the baseball field was fated to be my only stage in this life, so I worked myself to the bone performing there, in exchange for a meager shred of self-respect that made it bearable for me to go on living—just.

I was in a different class than A’Mo, but we were assigned to the same dorm room. His identity as a member of the school volleyball team quickly won my friendship. The event that made the greatest impression on me took place the first night we shared the same room. In the middle of the night, he rustled out of bed and began beating about in the darkness until the iron bed squeaked and shook.

“Big bro, what are you doing?” I asked, rubbing my sleepy eyes.

“Go to sleep, leave me alone.”

“What are you doing bare-assed?”

The next day I was woken up by waves of crisp, tingling sound. This strange noise was coming from A’Mo’s electric razor. I watched him proudly raise his chin and follow its contours to shave his thick, full beard. As I rubbed at the sleep in the corners of my eyes, a confused feeling of mixed jealousy and envy arose in me. You should know that I was a late bloomer; I stepped over the border between boyhood and manhood very late. My boyhood was particularly long, and as I stood on this side of the border, I’d feel a pang as I observed the rituals of those on the other side. What’s more, the people around me seemed to grow fewer all the time. They’d disappear for a while, then suddenly appear on the other side of the border, proudly shaving their beards with crisp little *gr-gr* sounds, quite intolerable.

Back to A’Mo. We’d all seen him naked in the communal bathroom, and he truly was bigger and stronger than anyone. With his great swatch of black hair in that crucial spot he was more man than anyone, too. We were hazily aware that he’d spied life’s perplexing secrets earlier than any of us. Because of that manly, stalwart bearing of his, he gradually became the leader of our nest of little roosters. And he really did rise to his role, never once disappointing us.

After lights out in the dorm each night, he'd relate an episode from one of his romances with a student from some girls' school. He also told us the story of the lady boss at the beef noodle stall in his hometown. The lady boss was thirty-four or -five and hadn't lost her looks. One time A'Mo went for noodles, and positioning herself right in front of him, she proceeded to put on her nylon stockings. Afterward, A'Mo got that pair of stockings. The objects of his affections were numerous. He was like a dog in spring, leaving the marks of his rut all around: in public toilets, at the train station kiosk, in the restroom at the sports field, in pedestrian underpasses, hotels—the scent of his rut was everywhere. We blinked our seventeen-year-old eyes in the dark, watching those sexy lovers of his walk by one after the other and feeling hot all over.

"How did you do it?"

"You'll understand when you grow up." He squeezed a pimple.

"You really stuck your tongue in her mouth?"

"How disgusting."

"You just don't understand." He was full of self-satisfaction.

"Does it really taste that good?"

"Did you put your hand inside her clothes?"

"Enough, I'm tired. That's all for today, we'll continue tomorrow."

So it was that every night we peeped through that pair of precocious eyes of his at things adults did that made you blush and laugh out loud.

On my seventeenth birthday A'Mo gave me a book. When the flock of little roosters saw its title they laughed till they stamped their feet.

"*The Carnal Prayer Mat*—what's it about?" I feigned confusion. Actually, anyone who didn't know of the renowned title of that book would have to be a great, stupid ox. Passing by the bookstalls at night markets you were always carefully circumspect, but the titles of certain books would take advantage of a moment's carelessness to seize your glance. *The Carnal Prayer Mat* was one such title. There might even be some who'd step up, bold as brass, to flip through its contents!

"Have a look through it and you'll see."

"I don't want to."

"Cut the pansy stuff. When you've read this book you'll be an adult. It's like the 'capping ceremony' for boys on their twentieth birthday in old times."

"Forget it. I have to memorize English vocab, we've got a test tomorrow."

The little roosters around us joined in the clamor. A'Mo read a passage aloud amid the jovial uproar, and the crowd laughed itself into a frenzy.

I couldn't help laughing myself. "If it's so interesting, why don't you keep it yourself for reference?"

A'Mo raised his feet nonchalantly. "I've done everything in there so many times it bores me. Reference, my ass!"

When the little roosters heard those words they simply exploded with delight.

A'Mo was just that kind of number-one character. All you could do was look up at him from the lower ground. You needn't think of copying him—he was inimitable.

It happened the spring of the year I graduated.

On a certain morning that spring, I found in the mirror a bashful little bristle on my upper lip. It signified that my youth was on the point of maturing and falling, spent, from the vine. So immersed was I in excitement that I remained quite oblivious to the great change that was like a torpedo approaching the tip of my nose, on the point of exploding. I sat in the classroom, the acne on my cheeks stinging faintly, while outside the window was a perfect spring. Saturated by rain, the muddy pond sprouted tender yellow shoots, and the sunshine shouted out on the orchid tree's branches, making it impossible to concentrate. A little sparrow cheeped and the dry grass danced and leaped between the eaves. You frequently glimpsed campus groundsmen brandishing brooms to chase off a pack of boisterous, frolicsome stray dogs. I watched the dogs fleeing across the sports oval, spirits high, each sniffing the scent of another's privates. That's the impression that spring left with me, like a fixed photographic

negative that occupies a particular space in my heart. Spring has always been a strange season. The best and the worst things always happen to you during that critical period. Later, thinking about what happened, I felt that spring ought to take part of the responsibility.

The whole thing began with the strip show.

That A'Mo frequented that sort of place was universally known. He spoke about it with an air of great mystery. The strip dancers wore colorful feather dresses and danced hot dances on the stage, lifting their thighs to reveal black underwear and petticoats with gold lace embroidery on the edges. They emanated a light body scent peculiar to women that grabbed hold of one's olfactory nerves with a lucid jolt. On the stage were scarlet artificial flowers, a profusion of colored satin ribbons, and shiny gold instruments playing wild, ecstatic tunes. The area beneath the stage overflowed with the stink of men's sweat and foot odor, and faces darkened by the sun chewed on one cigarette after another. Blue smoke drifted slowly upward to converge in a dense fog, masking the truth of what lay beneath the strip dancers' black petticoats when they raised their thighs.

Listening to A'Mo relate everything about women, you often felt there was a layer of thick fog hanging in the midst of it, masking the most intriguing part. Even if you took a palm-leaf fan and tried to fan away the fog, it was useless. The intriguing part remained an impenetrable riddle.

That was probably why we were seized with the idea of getting to the bottom of it ourselves.

Right around that time there was a song and dance troupe that performed strip shows touring the city. The location was the theater behind the banyan tree boulevard. The theater was renowned near and far: a gray-white building with a black felt curtain hanging over a door that swallowed and disgorged male audiences of every age and class. Generally speaking, no man staying in that city of ours neglected to hand over his cash a few times to go in and take a look.

The spring tormented our nest of little roosters to lonesomeness and impatience. All felt a pressing need to get into that gray building

and see for themselves the true image behind the black felt curtain, exercising the right that a mature man ought to enjoy.

It was on the last day the troupe was performing that we agreed to make our exploratory trip. The members of the trip included Little Old Man and Toothy from our dorm room, as well as Bigmouth from the class next door. My little brother Pickled Egg wanted to join in, but was prevented by me.

"Why can't I go?"

"This is men's business."

"I'm only a year younger than you."

"You've got no beard yet, you can't go. Stay in the dorm and memorize English vocab."

"Then I'm going to write and tell Dad."

"Watch out or I'll treat you to a knuckle sandwich."

"If you give me your baseball cap, I won't tell."

"We'll see about that after I graduate."

"Then you have to recommend me for the baseball team."

And that's what we agreed on. With A'Mo as our leader, we were to leave on the exploratory trip after class was out.

That day was an important date for me because it was also the day I decided my preferences for university. I remember it very clearly. I handed in my preference card first thing, and later I was summoned to the school counselor's office. Being summoned by Counselor Wang Daren for a one-on-one talk was of great significance. It showed that you were a mature individual, that he treated you as a friend on an equal footing. If you strolled about the campus shoulder to shoulder with Wang Daren discussing matters of school and life, the whole school would be stirred up into a commotion wild enough to raise a layer of topsoil.

Wang Daren taught Chinese. He was the most heavyweight of the school's heavyweight teachers. I'd noticed that when speaking to him, even the headmaster didn't dare look him in the eye and became a picture of abashment. The halo over Wang Daren's head was brighter than anyone's. When he walked in the sunshine, his white shirt reflected a dazzling white light that made one fear to look too

closely. He was also encircled by more rumors than anyone else. When he walked past in the corridor, you could see a bustling, babbling crowd of rumors like dwarfs following him closely along; their faces could be made out quite clearly. Some said he was the illegitimate son of a certain cabinet member; some said he was the direct descendent of a Qing dynasty minister. The most common story was that he had originally been a professor in one of the major universities in the north, but because he enjoyed the innocence of middle-school students, he'd requested a demotion to our school. His ultimate goal, though, was to go to a remote mountain village to teach middle school. We all believed this final explanation, as it fitted very nicely with the pleasing impression given by his white shirt. In class he often spoke of his ambition of going to teach in the country, but he'd never succeeded in it. He didn't say why, but we all guessed that something or other must have held him back. I used to envisage his feet bound by some black thing similar to a rattan rope. He once led us on the maddest caper—going to the school's lotus pond for a class on the poetry of Li Shangyin.² For that he received an admonition from the school, and the slanderous remarks of other teachers pelted his lean, sprightly figure like hailstones. Another story had it that he hadn't been admonished by the school at all, but on the contrary had won accolades from the head of the education committee and other such eminent figures. Around that time all the students and teachers were secretly whispering in each other's ears, dispersing only to regather again immediately, like humming, buzzing flies, rubbing their hands and feet together, talking about how Wang Daren was this, that, or the other.

No matter what he was, though, Wang Daren won enormous recognition among the students. If you found yourself at a disadvantage in a debate, you had merely to brandish the name Wang Daren to crush your opponent instantly. Even the idol A'Mo didn't conceal his admiration for Wang Daren. His bookshelf was filled with the works of Xiong Shili, Fang Dongmei, Qian Mu, and Lao Sze-Kwang, all books that Wang Daren referred to.³ After dinner I'd often catch A'Mo sitting there in a highly philosophical pose deliber-

ating on Confucian and Taoist thought, with those great feet of his in their size forty-six sneakers raised up to one side. In this way, Chinese became the top subject in the minds of humanities students, its imposing presence quite overshadowing business management and law. If you listed Chinese as your first preference for university, you immediately became a giant magnet, your enormous magnetism pulling all envious glances. The consensus was that only those possessing both courage and wisdom were qualified to study in a department of Chinese.

On the day we were planning to go to the strip show I handed in my preference card and later was called by Wang Daren to the counselor's office.

"I've seen your preference card. Do you want to think it over some more?"

I was shaking. "The stu—student has decided." Speaking with the ideal form, you can't help but tremble with fear.

"It's a hard road to travel."

"The student has de—decided. What the tea—teacher can do, the s—s—student can too."

"The Chinese Department isn't nearly as interesting as you imagine."

"The student is de—determined to study hard."

"You've discussed it with your family?"

"I have."

"All right. Go think it over some more. I'm afraid I may have inadvertently suggested to you that Chinese is the only meaningful choice. That's not really true at all."

I left the counselor's office trembling all over and returned to the classroom, where many curious glances awaited me at the door.

"You really put down Chinese as your first preference?"

"Too bad my old man's forcing me to take law."

"Chinese, really? How brilliant."

"You've got guts."

"Long live the Chinese Department!" Someone dropped a textbook and yelled.

I laughed. Through the happy shouts I saw another me in the sun at the far end of the corridor, wearing a white shirt and radiating blinding white light.

At after-class cleanup I dragged a broom to the white concrete wall and moved it about ineffectually a couple of times, then wandered to the other end of the corridor. The school volleyball team was in deadly form; the big interschool match was about to begin and they were practicing their final drill. The whole corridor and the second and third floor balconies were full of little roosters taking in the action, and I took up a position in the crowd, leaning on my broom like a staff. A'Mo was out there, too, leaping up to smash the ball savagely. The white ball streaked out in a straight line, passing through the defending hands of the other team's guard to land inside the line—a real beauty. The applause rose high as the ball hit the ground.

A'Mo was the definitive hero of the field in the eyes of all the spectators, but he acted as if he heard nothing of their applause. He wiped the hot sweat from his forehead with the palm of his hand and held his chin high, cold and proud as a haughty fighting cock. Outside the cyclone-wire fence quite a few passersby watched the battle, too, the most interesting of which were of course those whose uniforms made up a blanket of green. They came from the girls' school that was considered the partner school of ours. From a distance the girls looked as alike as string noodles in clear soup: white faces, cheeping and chirping like sparrows, noisy and excitable, annoying as anything. You might just make out which one's lips were particularly red and shiny, but that was the extent of it; they all looked equally affected and pretentious, quite disgusting. But I'd be willing to bet that seven out of ten of the little roosters watching the volleyball match were there for the girls. Those girls had an inexpressible chemical attraction that caused one to lose concentration and made one want to take another look at them without knowing quite why. The little roosters were drooling, telling each other low-class obscene jokes and casting appraising eyes over the blanket of green. And when A'Mo dealt out

his frequent deadly smashes, how much of it was a show for the girls? That's a man's vanity; the playing field has always been the best venue for a show. What first captured the hearts of the young ladies from the other school was always either the basketball players or the volleyball players. You saw opportunity speeding toward you but got intercepted halfway by those big, tall figures. You watched those big, tall figures lingering in the street, the shoulder straps of their schoolbags hanging down long, with a different green-uniformed girl every time following along behind their ass. Being jealous would get you nowhere. There were so many on the school basketball and volleyball teams; why the hell couldn't you grow a bit bigger and taller? Since you were a natural-born seven-inch nail, all you could do was bide your time on that toilet of a baseball field and banish all thoughts of volleyball. You weren't A'Mo: If you wanted to investigate the truth about women you'd just have to buy your ticket at the theater like a good boy.

After school I stayed in the classroom silently repeating English vocab. This was an unstated agreement between A'Mo and me: On the days when he practiced volleyball I'd read in the classroom, waiting for him so we could go back to the dorm together. We always walked out the school gate side by side. Sometimes he'd be tired after practice and take off his great size forty-six sneakers, tie them together, and swagger through the streets with them hung around his neck like a couple of great mackerels. As for me, I carried my school bag across my shoulders and wore my red baseball cap, bouncing the volleyball all the way as we walked along. The whole street was full of our bright teenage shadows. Every doorway and window was filled with the booming echoes of our bouncing volleyball, and girl and boy students often looked over from the roadside in curiosity. Of course most of their envious and admiring glances were directed at A'Mo, but a few of them fell on me, too. I'd feel my whole body turn red-hot and the soles of my feet seemed to tread on two light, floating clouds.

That day I was memorizing vocab and waiting for A'Mo, now and then touching the red baseball cap on my head.

Bigmouth from the class next door walked over. He was a solid little short guy, and in his schoolbag he hid a photo of a certain Japanese singer. The crudest thing of all was that he also kept a photo of her in a bathing suit under his mattress. Faced with that type of character, all you could do was scoff. Of course you, too, had thought about pasting a photo of someone in a bathing suit above your bed, but all you'd ever done was think about it and never put it into practice. That's why all you could do was scoff.

Bigmouth walked over. "Hey, you're still here?"

"I'm waiting for A'Mo."

"Don't forget the important business at six-thirty."

"I won't."

"When it happens, whoever flinches is a sucker."

"It won't be me."

The two of us acted as if we were discussing some serious matter, raising our voices cockily to let our classmates hear.

"What's the big mystery?" someone asked.

"Whatever shady scheme you're hatching, count me in."

"No can do, all the places are taken," I said.

"What the hell is it?"

"Men's business," said Bigmouth.

"If you won't tell, forget it. Cocky bastards."

Bigmouth guffawed loudly, showing his big, wide mouth with its one missing tooth. "We'd like to take you along, but you've got no hair on your chin. We mustn't slay the pure innocence of youth."

Our classmate swore and walked off, while the others laughed and cussed.

Bigmouth spoke again. "You handed in your preference card?"

"Yes."

"You definitely decided to put Chinese as your first preference?"

"Of course, Chinese."

"Fuck, I gotta hand it to you."

"I've made up my mind."

"You've got the most guts of all of us."

"I just don't want to go against my own interests."

"You want to be Wang Daren the second," someone interjected.

I could sense that my position among my peers had risen enormously. That was the most glorious moment of my life. I don't believe many people could have more than a couple of experiences like that in a lifetime.

I remained in the classroom memorizing vocab. From my seat I had a perfect view of the lily pond. There I sat, memorizing those cryptic words and gazing out at the lily pond. I saw a pair of white geese swimming silently back and forth on the pond, their wings gilded with a layer of radiant silver by the dusk sunlight, like bright, clean cotton-silk fabric. A white goose stepped measuredly up onto a boulder and shook the water droplets from its wings, then used its dull yellow beak to pick and jab at the feathers under its partner's wing. The orchid tree on the bank of the lily pond dropped abundant flowers like pink rain. I fell into a trance, feeling a little light-headed as a slight breeze stirred the fine hairs on the back of my neck and the elusive scent of water lilies drifted on the air. It was only mid-spring at the time and the water lilies hadn't yet opened, and yet I smelled the scent of water lilies—now wouldn't you say that's strange?

I half-closed my eyes, on the point of dozing off. The white image of the goose gradually grew before my eyes, until finally it completely dominated my field of vision. Just then I heard the *clack-clack* of leather shoes on the terrazzo floor.

The homeroom teacher, Wang Daren, appeared before my eyes. "You're still here?"

"I—I'm waiting for A'Mo." I started to stammer again.

"Isn't he practicing ball?"

"He's practicing ball."

"He spends too much time practicing ball."

"Too—too much?" I hated my stammer.

"He still owes me an essay."

"He keeps saying he's going to hand it in."

"That's good."

I hung my head and flipped through my book, flipped through it till the cover turned soft and worn. I couldn't think what I could say

that he would find interesting and that would also appropriately “exhibit” some of my freshly learned high-school wisdom.

“Lately he seems somewhat unstable emotionally. Has he said anything to you?” Wang Daren asked.

“No—no, he hasn’t.” I was still stammering.

“He hasn’t said a thing?”

“He hasn’t.” I turned my head and gazed at the pair of geese on the lily pond, hidden among the crowd of orchid tree flowers, touching at the neck, resting with their eyes closed.

“Just last night I called him in for counseling . . .” Wang Daren peered at me as if searching for something.

No wonder A’Mo was back so late last night. After dinner he’d said he was going out for a walk and hadn’t returned. We were all yawning, but still he didn’t come back to tell us jokes. It must have been the middle of the night before he came back. He exhaled in the darkness, taking off his clothes and sitting dumbly on the chair with his newly number three buzz-cut head in his hands. The breath he let out was very heavy and very long.

“A’Mo, is that you?”

“Are you still up, little devil?”

“Where did you go?”

“Don’t ask so many questions, kid.”

“After the women again?”

“Don’t ask too much, kid.”

“Did you stick your tongue in her mouth?”

“Don’t talk, go to sleep.”

“Tomorrow we’re definitely going to the strip show?”

“What—too excited to sleep?”

I scratched my head. “Can you really see it clearly?”

“Clear as day.”

“Including the most mysterious part?”

“Including the most mysterious part.”

Again he held his great head and looked out the window. His eyes were filled with water-blue moonlight.

“A’Mo, did you go out skirt-lifting again?”

Thinking back, I realized A'Mo had seemed a bit different from his usual self the night before. I'd dimly sensed that he was curled up in his nest, hatching his own indecipherable secret. He had not said a word about having met with Wang Daren. What could it be he was hiding?

"He didn't say anything at all?" Wang Daren seemed preoccupied.

I shook my head.

Wang Daren let out a slow breath and laughed. "That's good. He's not in a bad position: smart, good looking, figure of a first-rate clotheshorse. It's a pity he doesn't work hard enough."

I find it very hard to express my reaction when he said that: I felt I'd been cast aside. I myself found it strange that I should think that. I imagined myself going through that gray front door to Wang Daren's house and seeing A'Mo sitting on the sofa, drinking tea face to face with Wang Daren, the mouths of their teacups giving off rising white steam and the orange lamplight shining on their faces. I walked forward and stumbled over the volleyball that A'Mo had left on the floor. The ball rolled in a perfectly straight line to their side and I heard Wang Daren say, "A'Mo, you are an outstanding child. If there's ever anything on your mind, don't hesitate to come and see me." A'Mo answered, "I've been led astray by a girl..." Just like that, they began their adult men's conversation. I walked brokenheartedly out the door. As I went down the steps I slipped, my chest hitting the red-painted iron balustrade, and the pain reached to the bottom of my heart.

Wang Daren had once taken me to his house, too. I remember that I crouched on the sofa, my head bowed over the surface of the tea in my teacup, where I saw the face of a youth, a little pale from excitement. He led me through that gray door with his own hand, into that life of his that was like a mass of riddles. I've forgotten what we talked about; I felt I, too, had become part of the mass of riddles. I guess I must have told him about the conflict between my father and me. And I let drop a few melancholy tears. Amid the blurriness of the tears he seemed to take my hand and squeeze it sincerely, saying, "If there's ever anything on your mind, don't hesitate to come

and see me." Maybe he had also kissed my cheek. "Think of me as your most intimate friend, all right? We trust each other. This is a secret between the two of us."

Had he said the same words to A'Mo? I couldn't know. But I was certain he'd never praised me as an outstanding child, nor ever voiced approval of my good, clotheshorse figure. I guess seventeen-year-old boys are all prone to jealousy like that. Even if your dog runs off for an illicit liaison with the neighbor dog, you feel the dejection of having been cast aside. I looked at teacher Wang Daren standing before me: Did he have some secret agreement with A'Mo? He had taken me down the steps at his house, past the orchid tree in its abundant bloom, to his family's ancestral shrine.

"To commemorate our becoming good friends." He nodded, indicating that I should offer incense for his arrayed ancestors.

"Remember, this is a secret between us two."

Had he also let A'Mo offer incense for his ancestors?

"I remember you said you were interested in Xun Huisheng. I've recorded the highlights of some of his performances.⁴ When would you like to come by my place and pick them up?" Wang Daren patted my shoulder. In his eyes was written with absolute clarity: Trust me, I am your friend.

"You are an outstanding child; I have great hopes for you. You're Chinese department material." He also said, "I think you've made the right decision."

I think in the end I was won over by that most agreeable statement. Maybe all teachers have the skill of making their students docile and obedient, but in any case I now seemed to realize it was pretty stupid to consider my dear brother A'Mo a rival for his favors.

I waited in the classroom for A'Mo to return until dusk fell at six. The sky darkened little by little, the scent of water lilies on the air dulled, and I smelled the stink of burning gas coming from the dining hall outside the wall that encircled the classrooms. I sat on my rock-hard chair and watched the black night spread out its ground-length black cape and hang stealthily about the door. With a *bmph*, I turned on the light to disabuse it of any notion of stepping inside.

But eventually I grew doubtful: It was dark; how the hell could

you practice ball? Where had A'Mo sneaked off to? I grabbed my schoolbag and dashed out into the corridor. The ballgame had broken up ages ago and the field was utterly deserted. The only thing there was a weary old net. Time flowed up to it, made a turn, oozed through the holes in the net and kept on flowing. I stopped short; I felt as if someone gave me a muffled punch in the back of the head. Several pink petals fell silently down from the branches of the orchid tree. A'Mo had definitely gone, but why hadn't he come for me? This had never happened before. What was going on? I bamboozled myself with questions. It was true that sometimes he ignored me, but he'd usually come back to the classroom and appear in the doorway once or twice on purpose, laughing and talking with someone else as if he was having such a great time, telling me with his glance: I can't be bothered with you any more, why don't you go back to the dorm by yourself, I'm going with my friend. Then I'd gather my books, laughing silently to myself, and walk out the school gate, keeping my distance from him.

I knew perfectly well he couldn't get along for long with other people and always took leave of his friend at the school gate. I tracked his shadow, sniffed the smell of his sneakers. Maybe over a bowl of noodles at the yellow-noodle stall by the gate the two of us would make up. But now I couldn't see his silhouette, couldn't find the footprints of his great size forty-six sneakers on the ground, couldn't sniff out the distinctive, sour smell of his sweat in the air. Obviously he was already far away.

What was going on? In my hand I held a big bunch of clanging, clattering keys, but I couldn't tell which one I should use to open the great gate of truth.

Back at the dorm, the crowd was restless. Bigmouth was leaning on the door frame, bullshitting away to those inside. As soon as he saw me he yelled out, "So you're back at last."

Toothy came over. "Little devil, did you really put Chinese as your first preference?"

"Fuck, gotta hand it to you."

I walked into the dorm. A'Mo's bunk was empty, and the fat white roly-poly volleyball was missing from under the bed.

"All three of us chose law. We'll be relying on you to fulfill our wish."

"Tonight after the strip show we'll treat you to a hell of a meal."

"It's decided."

"Hey—what about A'Mo?" said Bigmouth.

I took off my coat and picked up my basin and towel, preparing to go to the bathroom and wash myself clean of aggravation.

"What about A'Mo? Didn't he come back with you?"

"God knows where he's gone," I said.

They became anxious. "What, he's disappeared?"

"He's hiding, for sure."

"I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"I'd say he's never even been to that kind of place at all. His descriptions are so exaggerated, but really he's just making it all up," said Toothy.

I gave him a fierce glare. "Of course A'Mo's been there. He wouldn't lie."

"So where is he?"

"Don't ask me," I said.

"The two of you mates are so close you wear the same pair of jocks and eat out of the same bowl. If *you* don't know where he's gone, he's disappeared."

Bigmouth threw his toothpick on the ground. "If he's not coming back, how the hell can we go? We needn't bother!"

"Let's go, why shouldn't we?" said Toothy.

"Of course we'll go," said Little Old Man.

Bigmouth folded his arms and stared at me. "Fuck it! Some friend A'Mo is—says he'll be here, then pisses off at the last minute."

I felt dizzy. "Something must have suddenly come up. It must have."

A'Mo didn't return that night, but we went ahead with our plan all the same. At exactly six-thirty we rode our old-style bikes squeaking and wobbling through the clamorous crowds toward the great gray

theater door with its curtain of black felt. By now the sun had fallen beneath the horizon, but the savor of its heat still hung on the air. It wasn't quite seven, yet you couldn't imagine the extraordinary darkness of the streets that day. There were few pedestrians about, and we all rode till we sweated and our shirts clung wetly to our backs. It felt as if we'd ridden halfway across the city, but still the lanes and alleyways stretched infinitely off into the darkness. The street lights were dim and hazy, flashing past over our heads, blurring your vision. I wore my baseball cap with the brim pointing backward and pedaled my bike with all my might, my mutinous blood ramming in my forehead. I heard the whispering of wind by my ears, but there was no wind. Before long my freshly bathed body was once again immersed in a sour-smelling mire of sweat. I'd never imagined the road to the theater could be so dark and so arduous. When we finally confronted the theater, with only a single road between us and it, its signboard floating in the light, gray mist, it looked a little unreal. I think it was then that I became aware of fate tailing along behind me, waiting for the right moment to deal me its fatal blow.

"We're here. Who's going to buy the tickets?" asked Little Old Man.

"Bigmouth, you're eldest."

"I'm beat, let me rest a minute."

"Toothy, will you go?"

"Let me go take a piss in the grass first."

At the theater's doorway stood a desultory few motorbikes and bicycles, and from the ceiling hung just a single hundred-watt bulb. The whole building looked slightly desolate, like a ruined city. The ticket booth was gloomy and unremarkable. A little hole the shape of a half circle was cut out of the frosted glass window, and on the glass were two rows of words:

ADULTS 120 YUAN

CHILDREN/STUDENTS YUAN⁵

"Motherfucking A'Mo, when we get back I'm going to flatten him."

"They don't sell student tickets."

"Will they let us in?"

"They'll refuse us entry."

"Motherfucking A'Mo."

"I told you A'Mo sucked us in. He's a big fat liar."

I parked my bike and heard myself say, "Give me the money, I'll get the tickets."

I'd always been silent and cowardly, at most just a gray shadow at A'Mo's back, but that day I suddenly stood up. In the end what happened was the three of them gave me money and I went to buy the tickets. As I stood before the ticket window and stuffed the money in, I completed an important transaction with fate: For the first time in my life, I bought an adult ticket. The other guys were stunned by my courage. With difficult steps I walked over, my head spinning and my vision dim, and put the tickets into their hands. The hundred-watt bulb on the ceiling dazzled me, so I could barely open my eyes; why a hundred-watt bulb should have all the spiteful heat and brilliance of the sun was a riddle. The light illuminated the expansive wasteland opposite, shining on a patch of wet miscanthus grass leaves, the record left by Toothy a moment ago when he'd pissed there. From amid the gently wavering shadows of the grass, I seemed to see a round white volleyball roll out.

I shook my dull, heavy head. "It's starting. Go in."

"Where are you going?" my friends asked.

After standing openmouthed for some moments, I managed to squeeze out an amorphous sentence: "I . . . I find A'Mo, I . . ." Without knowing why, I felt an ominous premonition. The premonition hid behind Wang Daren's gray door, luring me on.

And so it was that that ticket, representing the passage between boyhood and manhood, was torn into little pieces by my own hand.

The road back seemed even harder than it had on the way there. I unbuttoned my collar and pedaled my bike with all my might, as if something was chasing along behind me, an icy pressure approaching my spine. My mind hazy, I mumbled "Quick, quick." The pres-

sure at my back grew stronger and stronger, almost as if I were being pressed upon by some formless, heavy object. Panting, I looked behind me again and again: The streets were utterly dark, nothing at all was there. At that moment some force pulled me from my bike into midair. My body shot out and soared on the air, then fell sideways out time's window as an explosion sounded in my ears.

I limped back to the dorm and went to knock on my kid brother Pickled Egg's door. As soon as he saw me, he started screaming in the shrill voice of a little rooster.

"What happened to you?"

"Lend me your bike."

"Your knee's bleeding, what happened to you?"

"My bike hit a wall and smashed."

"You're bleeding, you're going to die!" I really hated the way Pickled Egg exaggerated like a little kid.

"Lend me your bike, there's something I've got to do."

"Where are you going?"

His incessant, high-pitched chatter was really unbearable. I limped over and took the bike key off the desk.

"Where are you going? Why didn't you go to the strip show?"

"Don't ask so many questions."

"I want to go, too."

"Cut the chatter."

"You're bleeding so much, you're going to die!"

"This is men's business, don't ask questions."

Thinking back now, my behavior that day really was peculiar. I lean in history's doorway, looking in, and I see Pickled Egg toilsomely pedaling his bike, rushing me toward another big gray door. To this day, I still can't understand it: What made me think A'Mo's bodily smell was coming from that direction? Why did I so stubbornly insist on proving with my own eyes that my judgment was right? I see that small, thin boy sitting on the back of the bike, his face full of hurt and anxiety; I see my long khakis ripped open, red blood seeping out, the blood mixed with grit drying out in the wind to form a brown-black scab. I guess when you contemplate your own youth, the scenes you see are just as blood-soaked as this one.

Panting hard, my little brother Pickled Egg surmounted the final small incline. Ahead stretched a dull yellow wall.

"Isn't this Wang Daren's house?"

"Wait here."

"Big bro, is it true what they say about Wang Daren telling you to study Chinese?"

"Why don't you keep quiet."

"Did you put down Chinese as your first preference? Dad's going to kill you, he really is."

I knocked on the door of Wang Daren's house, nobody answered. I knocked again and again.

"Dad's going to kill you!"

"Shut your dog's mouth."

"Everyone knows there's no future in Chinese. Why don't you study law?"

Even though nobody answered the door, I really did smell A'Mo's sour sweat and bodily smell. My knowledge of him told me he was inside. I heard his white volleyball rolling down Wang Daren's stairs; saw his great size forty-six sneakers walking across Wang Daren's floor, springing out the door, walking down the little path with the orchid trees planted all along it, and coming to the Wang family shrine. Purple smoke hung before my eyes. I stared dumbly at the orchid tree beside me.

"Big bro, you've gone crazy, why are you climbing the tree?"

Dragging my half-lame leg, I climbed doggedly up the tree. Then, just as I'd foreseen, I pulled aside night's black curtain, thick as felt, and saw the truth behind it.

My whole body was trembling. Pink petals from the orchid tree dropped in chaotic profusion to the ground, shaken free by my climb.

The scene I had conjectured and the view that now met my eyes converged as one. My gaze flew over the dull yellow wall, through the lush courtyard trees, and through the powerful scent of orchid flowers to see two silhouetted forms, one tall, one short, lying on top of each other at Wang Daren's ancestral shrine, in an intimate embrace like a man and woman; from one of the bodies I smelled

sour sweat and the whiff of sneakers, and I saw that the other was wearing a dazzling white shirt. I gave a muffled gasp and all but fell out of the tree. Fate was heartlessly dealing me blow after blow full in the face, beating me till my vision blurred and the pain penetrated my innards—strange that Pickled Egg couldn't hear it. I gripped the branches of the orchid tree, refusing to let myself down.

"What are you looking at?" yelled Pickled Egg.

I didn't reply.

"Aren't you coming down? It's late, I want to go back and memorize English vocab, there's a test tomorrow."

"Leave me alone."

"What do you see?"

"Piss off, leave me alone."

"Nice way of repaying my favor."

The pink petals still fell like rain in chaotic profusion from the orchid tree, making a sound like low sobbing. The wound on my knee had split open, and bright-red blood flowed out and dripped onto the muddy ground. The ache I felt was like many sharp-toothed mouths biting hard on my knee, my leg, and my head. There was nowhere that didn't hurt, nowhere that wasn't wounded.

It took all my strength to climb down from the tree. Treading the earth of the mortal world I still felt giddy.

"Let's go back," I said.

"Don't you want to see Wang Daren?"

"I'll give you a ride."

"Doesn't your leg hurt?"

"Get on the bike and don't move."

"You'd better not put Chinese as your first preference—Dad'll kill you for sure."

We rode past the red-paved sidewalk by the school. A few little devils were practicing volleyball passes under the fluorescent lights, their shadows falling on the wall like open wings desiring flight.

"Pickled Egg, do you want my baseball cap?"

"I'm not going to fight you for it. I've decided to save up and buy one."

"I'll give you my glove, too, and my kneepads."

"Are you crazy?"

"Do you want them?"

"Big bro, did you hit your head?"

"Do you want them or not?"

"What do you want in exchange?"

"I don't want anything."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

I'd given Pickled Egg a shock, and I could hardly help shedding some tears myself.

At the next intersection we ran into a red light. On a concrete post by the roadside was pasted an ad for a meat-market; in huge, square red letters was written RITES OF ADOLESCENCE.

I'll always remember the weather that afternoon: the scent of coumarouna grass floated on the air; the lily pond glittered in the sun; the white geese slid carefree over the water's surface; beside the pond an orchid tree silently dropped its pink petals.

This was how it came to pass.

Ten years later I returned to the exclusive boys' school I'd attended. By then I was already a mature man with a thick beard, broad shoulders, a deep voice, and several regular girlfriends who took turns going out to dinner with me downtown.

In my memory, I became an adult in an instant. Of course that's not really possible, but it's as though in the space of a single night I grew to 180 centimeters, and when I reached up I could touch the fluorescent lights that hung from the ceiling. My voice turned deep and thick, the pimples on my face grew large and many, and my armpits grew two patches of coarse, dense hair. I began to notice that girls' glances were always wandering over me, and I even received a few anonymous letters written in a graceful hand. I wore big size forty-six sneakers and ran amok at university. I was filled with confidence—but I did not play volleyball. The university team coach

came to see me and said my arms were as thick as the mouths of bowls: I was star material. I shook my head and said I wasn't interested. All day long I just hugged my volume of Li Shangyin's poems and recited beneath a girl's window. It gave me great pleasure; that was who I was. When I went back to my hometown, I made time to return to that celebrated theater to watch a strip show, as if going to fulfil a gentlemanly promise. When I went in I was shaking like anything, but when the girl appeared on stage I regained my calm. I saw everything, including the black, lace-edged petticoat beneath her rippling skirt, and all the rest—but you'd never imagine, I didn't feel anything at all. The truth, if not terrifying, is the most normal, uninteresting thing in the world, I guess.

When I returned to the school that time ten years later, it was the end of spring and the start of summer. Driving past the school, I found that the encircling wall adjoining the road had at some stage fallen into ruin. My gaze unimpeded, I could see the golden sun rays sprinkling on the lily pool, and that pair of big white geese was still there, opening out their great fat wings and gliding over the water's surface, highlighting the intensely green leaves of the water lilies. Beside the pond the orchid tree dropped an abundance of flowers, and squatting in the branches I saw a pale boy with a red baseball cap. It was my melancholy youth. I saw the mist that floated before his eyes.

It's been ten years: Does he really still refuse to come down and return to the earth of the mortal world? I couldn't stop my eyes from filling with hot tears. Amid the haziness of light and shadow, some water lilies extended prominently out from the water's surface and proudly opened their petals. Now, with absolute and utter certainty, I smelled the scent of water lilies. It was summer. Spring had lingered there, then quietly crept away: I had witnessed the entire course of the transition between seasons.

NOTES

1. Yang Zongrun, *Zhongli Xun Ta* (Taipei: Kaixin Yangguang, 1996).
2. Li Shangyin (813–858) is a Tang dynasty poet. *Trans.*

3. Xiong Shili (1885–1968), Fang Dongmei (1899–1977), Qian Mu (1895–1990), and Lao Sze-kwang (1922–) are all New Confucianist scholars. *Trans.*

4. Xun Huisheng (1899–1968) was one of the most celebrated masters of the female role in the Peking Opera during the period 1930–1950. *Trans.*

5. NT\$120 (yuan) is about US\$3.50 *Trans.*

WHO IS SINGING?



LIN CHUN YING

Lin Chun Ying (b. 1960) is the author of four collections of short stories, many of which touch upon gay themes. His most recent collections, *Burning Genesis* (1997) and *The Five Debilities of the Lover* (2000), are the most explicit in this regard. Like Lin Yuyi's writing, Lin Chun Ying's fiction frequently deals with queer adolescence. Lin Chun Ying received his master's degree in journalism from Queens College, New York, and has lived in Hong Kong. Much of his fiction, like this story, is drawn from experiences of diaspora. This story was anthologized in Yang Zongrun's second collection of contemporary *tongzhi* fiction in Chinese, *Rare Love*.¹

This short meditation on music and memory is the title piece of his second collection, *Who Is Singing?* (1994). Characteristic of Lin's earlier writing, the homosexual theme here is initially subtly hinted at rather than overt. It is implicit, for example, in the unanswered question of the identity of the estranged "you" to whom the first-person narrator addresses his wistful narrative, and in the fragments of stories the narrator recalls about himself and

his other university friends. This piece typifies the engrossment with the past, nostalgia, and disillusionment that are characteristic of Lin's writing, themes that have led David Der-wei Wang (in his introduction to *Burning Genesis*) to compare Lin's writing style to that of Chu T'ien-wen (this volume). The story offers us a tantalizing glimpse into the stirrings of student revolt on university campuses under the authoritarian regime of the KMT in the late 1970s, following U.S. recognition of the People's Republic of China and the consequent severing of diplomatic relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan (see note 5). For this narrator, the memories of his involvement in the Taiwanese nativist "campus folk-singing" protest movement recall both a lost love and an unfulfilled dream of meaningful political and cultural change.



"Blown on the wind like a wandering cloud,
 Lonely me, I'm forced to roam,
 Bearing my beloved guitar
 And a yellow wild chrysanthemum."
 "Don't ask where I come from,
 My home is far away.
 Why do I roam so far from home?
 For the olive tree in my dreams."

Then what? Which song should I quote? Can you help me think of something? For me, this is a very difficult task.

If you think back carefully and aren't overly forgetful, you'll surely understand my endeavor. During our adolescence in the sixth and seventh decades of the Republic,² the two sections of lyrics excerpted above concretely yet delicately implied a subtle metaphor for the culture; they constitute a minor offshoot of history. Following this logic, one can unearth from the tunnel of this not-too-distant moment many antique curios, like Huang Junxiong's puppet theater,³ the junior volleyball team, flared pants, Qiong Yao's films,⁴ and campus folk songs.⁵ With slightly heavier intellectual content there are things like the severing of diplomatic relations between the U.S.A. and the

Republic of China, the debates over nativist literature,⁶ banned books,⁷ and the Cloud Gate Dance Theater.⁸

Coming up with underlying reasons for the popularity of these songs isn't hard. I can think of several right now: the depoliticization line (the head-in-the-sand mentality of people living under an authoritarian regime; escapism); the sociological line (the etiolated, empty character produced by the pressure of competitive schooling and militarized education). But I prefer a more idealistic explanation: During the process of adolescence, every teenager experiences a moment of the purest ambition and aspiration; suddenly the sunset clouds fill him with distant longing, and he yearns to climb to the summit and preside over the whole world. Don't rush to contradict me just because this is idealist and I can't produce any objective, scholarly basis for it. For you must concede that combined, the debasement of reality and the crumbling of ideals produce a downward drag that exceeds even the destructive force of a falling star.

Though most of the revelations of adolescence soon wither and perish like short-lived flowers, people themselves are not so weak as to fall under a single blow. Memory is selective; it allows you to sift the dross for grains of gold, keep the good, and discard the bad. That's why we tend to speak of "the glory of bygone years" and reminisce about "the golden age of old." During that era, the two songs I mentioned touched a kind of common point in our spirit, which is why we cling to them and find them impossible to forget. The rigid dogmatism of the education system, the days of pressure and isolation, and the implacability of the social system as a whole meant that, over time, "roaming" and "lands far from home" came to stand in for something else. It's no wonder "Olive Tree" was listed as a banned song soon after.

I'm afraid this is something that Adorno, one of the founders of the Frankfurt School, didn't foresee.

Permit me to bring out my book bag. A Jew living in Germany, Adorno moved to Hollywood to escape Nazi persecution during the Second World War. This was precisely the time when the dream factory was at its glorious peak. Adorno watched the industrialization and standardization of mass culture's production and distribution,

and watched its function as entertainment transform into the political one of confining people's thought and hindering their development into independent, autonomous individuals. The culture industry saw people as a consuming mass and enslaved and stunted their mentality through continuous commercial consumption. Another version of Huxley's *Brave New World*.

The professor who taught media criticism theory was a yuppyish Jew, well versed in classical music as well as the rock and jazz popular since the fifties, and the various schools that derived from them. Studying Adorno was actually one big nightmare. At the start of term we first had to fight it out for a seat in the warm afternoon sun that slanted in during class, and then the professor—who'd sooner go naked than not wear name brands—wanted us to wrestle with Adorno. As I hurried back to my room after class through the frosty night streets, huffing and puffing white steam from my nose, I suddenly felt that at times the treasured land of the intellect seemed a gritty, frozen wasteland.

I longed to gather my courage and tell this professor who knew how to sing "Blue Moon" in different styles for different effects, that while Adorno couldn't be faulted, there is no paradise on earth. The just nation where the oppressed and enslaved follow theory's pristine blueprint and rise up as one was a starlight that shone continuously over our heads. But although stars are luminous bodies, they can't be used as lamps.

I know I have a tendency to use pleasing words to paper over the superficiality and inadequacy of my own thinking.

Of course in the classroom we touched on the spirit of rock: the rage, rebellion, and impassioned dreams of reform of the sixties; the mistrust and dispute of all systems by the flower children who made love, not war. Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and The Weathermen welcomed a new age with the bugle-call of their song. Too bad we missed out on that piece of history. When Joan Baez came over the sea to Taiwan she seemed just a trifling little folk-music queen. We couldn't understand why she bewailed a calf going to the slaughterhouse, and didn't see why she implored the hard rain to stop.

But we did envy the freedom of the summer swallows. I wondered whether in real life Adorno was really so rational and serious as to lack even a single emotion. Undeniably, the world in which we exist is an endless cycle of production and consumption. You're given twenty years to adapt to society's norms and develop a particular skill, then you're absorbed into the system and become a part of it: work, marriage, raising the next generation, buying a car and house, leisure and entertainment, and more work. Even the most private twists of emotional response are ruled and systematized by a great invisible hand that crushes them into the cyclical mechanism of production and marketing. Adorno and his associates interpreted this as the mechanization, objectification, and alienation of humans. With the wisdom to foresee humankind's plight so early on, how must he have felt in his later years? I can't even begin to imagine.

But tell me honestly, without the sugarcoating: Do you feel sad for yourself? Please don't lie to me, you can even swear, fucking hell, what's with this Frankfurt School bullshit. I can take it.

Actually, I'm not someone who much enjoys singing—I've grown more and more silent as the years have passed, though it's got nothing to do with Adorno. But each time I look back on the past I remember with heart-piercing poignancy those spring and summer evenings when after toiling all day through Chinese, English, history, and geography we'd tunelessly sing, using that limited vocabulary as a makeshift means of weaving a future, there in the newly warm dark of the campus.⁹ In the instant when a song finished, I'd suddenly feel I was in God's promised rose garden, wonderfully, purely fragrant. That's why after so much disillusionment, defeat, and compromise, and after the gradual cooling of passion, I've always treasured you in my heart. You're the link to that perfect, ephemeral piece of memory; you prove that my purest, gentlest hopes for life and the world truly have existed.

Except, from another point of view, isn't it true that amid the trials of reality you and this memory cause me continuous pain?

Roaming; lands far from home—now I know how to replace these with more concrete terms, like aims; short-, medium-, and long-term

goals; disrupting one's life plan; altered conditions; running away. Free of the enchantment of colorful romanticism, I no longer torment and indulge myself.

So our gradual estrangement is easily understood. From meeting several times a year to once every several years, it's even reached the point where we live in the same city yet only hear news about each other in a roundabout way at several removes.

No, no, please don't misunderstand and think I'm complaining about the alienation and impoverishment of modern life. I'm only thinking of the story of "a person's face; a peach blossom."¹⁰ When did youth become distant while seeming close—and more than that, lose its focus? We can't know for sure when or where it happened, and by the time we became aware of it we were already thoroughly powerless. That's the real, cruel story of youth.

When I was on my military service in the south, the too-ordered yet too-leisurely days had the effect of making me anxious about you, like a fool making trouble for himself. What was I worried about? That the way of the world is rugged, and the hearts of men devious? Was I afraid you'd grow coarse? I don't clearly know. Before day-break the fighter planes started up, engines exploding like boilers with bellicose force, breaking into my dreams. In your letters you said you'd broken your leg at the Kaohsiung barracks and lay in hospital, mad with boredom. Your parents had gone to Japan on some minor business; on an impulse you wore green canvas shoes and brick-red jeans to see them off at the airport. After the graduation ceremony you'd decided to take a trip from the south to the north of the island, visiting friends along the way, then go home to plan your next move. At the valedictory party you played Lotus-Pearl from *Lotus-Pearl's New Match*, and the night before, you had to run around for over two hours before managing to borrow a costume.¹¹

I've kept every one of your letters. After my release from the military, I worked a few years, but I couldn't shake my old habits and flew to the other side of the Pacific to be a student again. I was away three years. When I took out your letters to read after my return, it was a moist spring night, and I felt like a foolish old man out of step

with the times. I think the preservation of material objects lets me set down a final barrier against my encroaching nihilism. Ridiculous, laughable? I admit it. Then again, perhaps it's through investigating the metaphysics of thought and the movements of the soul by way of the material that we get strength for our tug-of-war with eternity.

As the years have passed, water flowing on and flowers withering, I've slowly gotten rid of my naïveté and impracticality. There are very few great joys, great sorrows, great ups, or great downs in my life, yet my thoughts are tortuous; the further I go, the more I think. To give the most trifling example, I've begun to experience the irritation of hair loss. Even though I'm secure in the knowledge that my hair is thick and the amount that falls out is well inside the bounds within which the new can replace the old, it frightens me. Thinking of the line from the poem "Each string, each strain, recalls lost youth," my regret grows even deeper.¹²

That which has passed away, like old love, like youth, will never be reborn or seen again. With each of life's todays I learn to warn myself, don't look back, don't regret. With my hands, my eyes, my heart, my senses I caress everything around me, make it all shine like gold.

Do you remember A, whom we worshiped when we were young? We always admired his intelligence and his childlike heart and concluded he was a real-life Peter Pan. While I was in America before New Year, I heard the story of his endless hardship and suffering. Finishing work in the early hours, I drove through the pitch-black streets with their traces of snow, past that neighborhood park with its artificial lake. Behind the bare, sparse birch trees, dirty yellow streetlights glimmered in the fog. I gripped the steering wheel blankly while on the radio Elton John and George Michael sang an old song—how should I translate it?—"I won't let the sun go down on me."

Time freezes, the heat and dust of the past turns into a pile of black and white photographs. So let the story itself explain everything—I needn't pretend to be the brilliant interpreter.

Then there's B. Imagine, after a few years as an ordinary salary-man, content with his lot, his weight's close to seventy kilos although

he's only 160 centimeters tall. On the phone I felt we were as strange to each other as if he were on a star a billion light-years away. We'd nothing left in common.

And C, that's right, even outgoing C, with his love of performance, has his dark side. In his struggle with his sexual orientation, he turned to religion for sanctuary and entered the ranks of selfless religious volunteers. Then finally he took over his father's business, and now he slaves in the world of commerce. Is his life happy? That God should truly protect him.

Of all of us, it's you who seem the most content.

As for me, I've started to dabble in classical music. I take all that is proud, unruly, passionate, and intense—whether in conduct or in thought and feeling—and channel it into my daily life like a subterranean stream. Not long ago my parents moved house. During those few days I vacillated amid the deluge of old things, including your letters, over and over sorting diamonds from rust. The traces of the past are hard to classify, even harder to winnow through.

Aside from all this, I'm hesitating about whether to tell you about my shattered heart. First let me mention Fromm, a scholar of psychology I greatly admire, whose books have moved and inspired me deeply. Fromm dedicated a book to theorizing the dignity, redemption, and significance of love. I can't repeat his words in detail. But unlike the reams of mystery, romance, realist, and even pornographic writing about love, he allowed me to experience a kind of pure, resonant wisdom. I felt joy that I, too, possessed this gift shared by all people.

This is the real diamond that glitters when one turns to look over the road one has walked.

You know, I've lived in a big city far away, where the street lamps at night hung like the moon and stars in the sky, where among the people walking in the streets there was none familiar to me, where the windy, thriving boulevards changed colors with the seasons. And then I met someone. It was the same in plot and detail as all love stories, the only difference being that while I was still in a feverish daze, it had already ended. I've tried hard to determine its breaking point.

So vastly different from our years between seventeen and twenty-two, when our feelings were resilient enough to withstand any kind of emotional turbulence—now I dare only watch in silence as what I have given dies before its time.

A flower tended in a bottle, the eyes of a growing infant, these are actually another kind of dying. I'm enchanted by their abundance, their fullness. On an ordinary afternoon I went to the building where he lived and handed his things to the janitor: Good-bye, my singular love. I refuse to fool myself any more, I refuse that most idiotic lie: At least I have your memory. Its stupidity cannot withstand the slightest logical interrogation.

I know we often hide ourselves in stupidity to escape keen, needling pain. On a glorious sunny day I drove to look at the ocean, thinking that next to the vastness of nature I'd see my own insignificance, and everything else would cease to matter. The ocean wind blew and the bright sun shone redly on my head; I covered my face and looked at the waves. No matter how much grief and disillusionment we've been through, we learn nothing. We simply return to the starting point: anticipation, waiting.

As in the legend of the Ching-wei bird trying to fill in the sea,¹³ as in the myth of Sisyphus, the sea of hate is hard to fill, the rolling stone cannot be stopped.

The stories of you, A, B, and C, and my love stretch back and thread through from my youth to the present—over ten years gone with a snap of the fingers—becoming an unbreakable curse. I hear it at midnight, dim and indistinct. And this night lies on the brink of the millennium. Looking back over time like water, who is singing?

NOTES

1. Yang Zongrun, *Nande You Qing* (Taipei: Kaixin Yangguang, 1997).
2. That is, in the 1970s and 1980s. The Republic of China was founded in 1911, and year dates in Taiwan continue to date from this year. *Trans.*
3. Huang Junxiong was instrumental in bringing the traditional *budai* puppet theater to television. *Trans.*

4. Qiong Yao is a popular woman writer, prolific throughout the 1960s–1990s, whose stories have been widely adapted for film and television. It is often said that her stories are especially popular with gay readerships. *Trans.*

5. University students in the late 1970s and early 1980s composed folk songs as a means of elaborating a form of local and specific Taiwanese cultural identity as a response to the humiliation of the United States' severing of diplomatic ties with Taiwan in order to establish formal recognition of the Beijing government. The celebrated singer Hou Dejian, who later went to Beijing and was active in the Tian'anmen Square student movement of 1989, rose to fame out of the campus folk-song movement. *Trans.*

6. The nativist literature movement of the 1970s challenged the cultural and political hegemony of the KMT administration and its mainland-centric culture by highlighting the specificity of local Taiwanese culture. Its proponents also attacked the modernist literature of the 1960s as exemplifying Western cultural imperialism, and there were protracted debates among literary intellectuals throughout the 1970s over the modernism versus nativism question. For a detailed discussion, see Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

7. During the harshly repressive martial law years of the Kuomintang administration under the Chiang family through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, often referred to as the period of White Terror, the party banned all books suspected of advocating Communist sympathies or of criticizing the KMT. During the same period, and especially in the intensely repressive decade following 1949, the government undertook the arrest, interrogation, and, in thousands of cases, execution of people suspected of Communist connections. *Trans.*

8. The Cloud Gate Dance Theater, founded by Lin Hwai-min in 1973, was the first contemporary dance company to be established in a Chinese-speaking society anywhere in the world; it continues with great success up to the present day. *Trans.*

9. See note 5, above.

10. "A person's face; a peach-blossom" (*renmian taohua*) is a set-phrase that refers to a poem by the Tang dynasty poet Cui Hu (late eighth century, dates unknown) lamenting lost love. The poet recalls the peach blossoms of the year before and the lover who was with him then but has now disappeared. *Trans.*

11. *Lotus-Pearl's New Match* was an immensely popular modern play written and directed by Jin Shijie in 1980. Jin's play is based on a Beijing Opera, *Lotus-Pearl's Match*, the story of a prostitute who discovers she is in fact the daughter of a rich family. For *Lotus-Pearl's New Match*, Jin modernized the story and set it in contemporary Taipei. *Trans.*

12. This is a line from the Tang dynasty poet Li Shangyin's poem "The Sad Zither," which evokes the melancholy of lost youth remembered. *Trans.*

13. The Ching-wei bird is said to be the reincarnation of a drowned woman. The bird, also known as the "bird of hate," has a habit of dropping stones and pieces of wood into the ocean; this action is interpreted as a metaphor for insatiable hatred. *Trans.*

SEARCHING FOR THE LOST WINGS OF THE ANGEL



CHEN XUE

Chen Xue (b. 1970) is a member of the new generation of queer writers, and her candid writings about women's sexuality have by turns shocked and fascinated Taiwan's literary establishment and reading public. Chen is the author of three story collections and one novel, all of which deal with such subjects as lesbian desire, bisexuality, and incest with an honesty and directness that have made her a celebrated figure among local lesbian audiences.

This story is taken from Chen's first collection, *The Book of Wrongful Women* (1995). After the book's initial publication, a controversy erupted over its explicit sexual content, resulting in copies thereafter being issued complete with cellophane covers and warning stickers, to the combined outrage and amusement of local queer literary circles. This story explores the complexities of the troubled relationship between a mother and her daughter through an interesting mix of traditional familial and modern psychological discourses. It also foregrounds the enabling power of the daughter's (and

narrator's) writing practice, suggesting the importance of queer writing like this in the struggle of individuals to forge sexual identities in the face of immense social and psychic pressures.



The first time I saw A'Su, I was certain that she and I were the same sort.¹ We're both angels who have lost our wings. Our eyes are fixed on a height attainable only in flight, our bare feet stand on the searing, obdurate earth, and yet we have lost the direction that mankind ought to have.

In the dark room, streetlight spilled a little brightness in through the glass of the window, and A'Su's naked body gleamed gently. She placed her hands on my shoulders and lowered her head to look at me; her luminous eyes a head above mine blazed with two rays of restless firelight.

"Cao-Cao, I have an incurable desire for you. What sort of secret is hiding inside your body? I want to know you, taste you, enter you . . ."

A'Su's deep, murmuring voice filtered into my ears; I was overcome with dizziness. She began undoing my buttons one by one, took my shirt off me, my bra, my skirt; finally my underpants, like a white flag, fluttered softly from the tip of her finger.

Naked, I was very close to her. All this was already fated to happen the first moment I saw her.

She softly embraced me, my eyes level with her erect nipples. They were shamefully beautiful. Next to her, I was like a half-grown girl—what sort of secret could a trifling little girl like me have to speak of?

I lay on A'Su's soft bed as her hands wandered, feeling their way over my body, and she muttered to herself as if casting a curse.

"This is Cao-Cao's nipple. This is Cao-Cao's nose . . ."

Like a spirit-woman's wand, her fingers slipped over my eyes and nose and mouth and neck. Each place they touched emitted a shiver of delight.

"Cao-Cao's nipple."

Her finger stopped on my nipple and drew gentle circles around it. After a tiny shiver, a wave of warm tidewater broke. It was A'Su's lips, gently sucking.

Afterward, she parted my lush pubic hair and layer by layer peeled back the hidden parts, step by step approaching my core.

"It tastes like tears."

When A'Su tasted my private part, my tears fell, and amid the salty wetness of tears I reached an orgasm like I'd never had before. It was like a fevered nightmare, falling unconscious in the mad hotness, screaming in unconsciousness, and in the screaming, gradually shattering apart.

It seemed as she presumed to enter my body, savagely striking against my core, that she wanted to break all of my bones. Yes, it was she. Even though she was a woman and had no penis to become erect and ejaculate, she entered right into my innermost part, getting deeper than any male organ could.

After I left her, I always saw my mother in dreams.

It was a big suite in a luxury hotel. Her hair was dyed red-brown, curled and unruly, and her eyes with their black-painted edges sparkled wildly. A couple of other women, bewitching just like her, thickly made-up and wearing only bras and underpants, wandered back and forth across the room, eating, smoking, and chattering in shrill voices.

I sat on the big, soft, circular bed, hugging a pillow, desperately chewing my fingernails, my eyes daring to look only as far as the white socks on my own feet. What was happening to this mother I hadn't seen for a year? She used to have long, thick, black hair, and a pair of long, delicate, single-lidded eyes! Her high-bridged nose was the same, and I recognized the rice grain-sized black mole next

to her right eye, but this woman looked like a stranger. The heavy odor of perfume coming from her and her red-brown hair made me want to cry.

"Cao-Cao, be a good girl, Mummy has business to do. Go down to the restaurant by yourself and eat some steak, watch a film, play awhile, then come back to Mummy, all right?" She stroked my hair and redid my braid. Then she gave me five hundred dollars.²

Blindly, I walked out. Near the door to the lift I bumped into a man.

"Little Sister is so cute! She ought to watch where she's going." He was big and tall and wore a suit. I saw him open my mother's door and slam it shut, then from behind the door I heard her laugh.

I didn't go to eat steak or watch a film. Sitting on the train home, I cried and cried, clutching the cash in my hand, my ears full of the sound of her laugh. Outside the window the scenery flew past. I knew right then that my childhood had ended.

I was twelve that year.

After I left her, I constantly saw her in dreams. Again and again, in my dreams, the train never arrived at the station, and my tears poured out of the train window like a sigh. The surging fire-red clouds in the sky were her red, red hair.

"Between your legs is a mysterious valley, sensitive, shivering, which gushes with gurgling spring water. That is the secret I must explore. Darling Cao-Cao, I so want to make you happy. I want to know how a woman gets happiness from here."

A'Su put her hand inside my underpants and caressed me, a cigarette in her other hand, and she narrowed her eyes and looked at me, smiling, as I sat writing. I could hardly hold my pen steady.

Before, I always thought that my mother was a wicked, sluttish woman. I hated her; I hated that after losing my father, she made me also lose my respect and love for her. I hated that when I was most lost, with nothing to rely on, she turned away and became a stranger.

I hated that even when I hated her this much, she was still tender toward me, just as before.

Only after meeting A'Su did I understand what is meant by "wicked" and "sluttish." Those are the very things I always desired, and my mother wasn't those things at all.

A'Su embodied my innermost desire; she was my dream. The world she represented was the source of all the happiness and pain in my life, the womb carrying me. Once the umbilical cord was cut, I reviled it, but after I died, it would be the tomb that interred me.

"I write because I want to love."

I have always felt that hiding within my body is a closed-up self. What force caused it to constrict? I don't know. What sort of face does it have? I don't know. What I vaguely sense is its restless shifting beneath heavy, heavy restraints. I sense, in my changing, twisted dream scenes, in my unguarded sleep-talk, in my unbearable pain deep in the night, the presence of a desolate and love-starved self.

I want to love, but I know that until I recover this self, I remain impotent in love.

So I write, trying with writing to excavate this hidden self. I write, I write as if masturbating. I write in a frenzy, and after writing I tear the pieces up one by one, as though ejaculating; and in obliterating them I experience an orgasm impossible in sex.

The first story that I didn't tear up was "Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel." A'Su was quicker than me and grabbed it first. At that time I'd only written half of it and didn't feel like going on, but she spent all night reading, and after she finished it she made fervent love to me.

"Cao-Cao, finish it, give it a chance to live." A'Su placed the pen into my hand and embraced my naked body, gently setting me on the chair at the desk.

"Don't be afraid of your own talent; it's your fate."

I saw this talent wearing a devil's mask, weakly, tremulously climbing up out of the filthy muck, intently stretching forth two withered arms, moving crookedly toward the long ladder formed by line upon line of words, forward, and forward again. . . .

Before this, I have lain in the arms of countless men.

The year I turned seventeen, I learned about sex from the body of a man ten years older than me. Unhesitatingly, I let him enter between my legs, even though it produced a pain hard to describe. In the moment when I saw the blotch of blood-red on the sheet, fierce joy broke out in my heart: the satisfaction of revenge. Finally, I need no longer cry for all the contradictory hurts my mother had bequeathed me.

Now that I was no longer a virgin, I had been released. I thought I could avenge myself on her in the arms of men.

I wore the green high-school uniform coveted by all young girls, and my hair was cut short, just above my ears.³ I had inherited my mother's good looks, although I lacked her height, but with my frail, slender frame I was actually even more attractive.

I was so tender and perfect in the eyes of others that the men who liked me always said I was like a delicate, crystal-bright angel, easily capturing their hearts.

Angel? Heaven knows how I loathed my own deceiving looks, all my features so similar to hers.

My schoolmates were young and innocent; I was already old the year I turned twelve.

"God! How can you remain so untouched?"

The man who taught me about sex said this after he came. He roughly entered me again, savagely bit down on my tiny nipple, and struck himself against me as though half mad, rocking me back and forth. He alternately shouted curses at me and begged me, until finally he lay against my chest and sobbed like a helpless, frustrated child.

"Demon! Yet how I love you!"

He kissed my red, swollen, unyielding private part and swore he'd never torment me or hurt me again.

I knew really it was I who was hurting and tormenting him; later, he became impotent, saying a pair of scissors in my vagina had cut off his penis and buried his love.

Scissors? That's right, there was a pair of scissors in my vagina.

And in my heart as well! Their blades had cut the connection between me and other people in the world; anyone who got near me would get soaked with fresh blood.

I can't recall when was the first time I went into that bar. Anyway, it was some deadly boring evening. Quite at random I charged into the bar, to discover that they mixed a fantastic Bloody Mary. Old-time jazz was always playing, and the customers sat scattered around by themselves, no one taking any notice of anyone else, concerned only with their own drinking and smoking. Nobody walked over to ask, "Would the young lady care to dance?" But of course that was partly because there wasn't a dance floor.

So it was that by day I clutched my textbooks and moved through the literature building like a normal third-year university girl, and by night I soused myself in the bar, drinking Bloody Marys mixed by the barkeeper, smoking, and endlessly writing the stories that I was fated to destroy. The barkeeper's name was FK, and he had a long, pale, clean-looking face that made his age impossible to tell, and beautifully formed hands that were as delicate and lively when caressing one as if he were at the keys of the piano.

Occasionally I'd go back with him to his little apartment—clean as a cat's nest—to drink for free and listen as he played the piano in a way that made your bones soften and melt away. Then I'd lie with him on the squeaky spring bed and listlessly make love. Those pretty hands of his could play no music on my body, but he still mixed me great Bloody Marys, and like a conscientious babysitter, he watched over each of my insomniac nights.

"Cao-Cao, it's not that you lack emotion, it's just that you don't love me."

FK was one of the few men not enraged or disappointed by this fact.

The night I first saw A'Su, I'd drunk six Bloody Marys. When she opened the door and entered, the whole bar's atmosphere became agitated—even FK's cocktail shaker lost its rhythm. I lifted my head

and looked at her. I saw her, her back toward me, as she talked to FK at the bar. Suddenly she turned her head, her direct gaze striking me, her long, red-brown hair billowing like great red waves.

My body was covered with hundreds of red-brown goose bumps.

I drank another and then another Bloody Mary, and in the blood-red liquor I saw her beckon me; felt her black-edged eyes, glittering, glancing, half-smiling at me; felt her body almost erupting out of her low-cut, tight black dress. I felt her deep husky voice murmuring pornographic obscenities into my ear. Vaguely, I realized that my underpants were soaked. What ignited my desire turned out to be a woman.

She so resembled the part of my memory I could not approach that under her gaze, I felt I had returned to the womb, humid and warm, and I could hear the sound of blood pulsing in veins.

I buried my head in my glass, trying to kiss her lips.

In my dizzy faint, I felt the smell of the Bloody Marys backing up from my stomach to my mouth, saw her walking toward me step by step. A rank bodily smell poured forth, then a tall, full, fleshy body was embracing me, drowning me. . . .

The first thing I was aware of when I opened my eyes was a rank, bodily smell. It was the most obscene odor I've ever smelled.

I had a splitting headache. Forcing open my sore, unwilling eyes, I discovered that I was lying on a ridiculously large round bed; sunshine, bright and warm, splashed into the room from the floor-length window. I managed to sit up and look around the room: It was a big room of over ten *ping*, furnished completely in patterns of black, white and red, simple and striking.⁴ I was lying alone at the center of all this; it was like a bizarre, magnificent dream.

I was certain this was where she lived—it must be! I was still wearing the clothes from the night before, but aside from that, all I retained of that night was my headache.

Suddenly, the red door opened. At last I saw her walking toward me. She wore no makeup, and dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, she was even more beautiful than I had imagined.

"I'm A'Su."

"I'm Cao-Cao."

She had come!

The first time I smelled semen I knew that I'd never in this life get pleasure from a man's body.

After I moved in with my mother, I'd often see strange men going into her room, then coming out. Once, after the man had gone, I pushed open her door and saw the rumpled bedclothes on the bed and heard the sound of running water coming from the bathroom; she was taking a shower. I walked toward the trash basket next to the bed. It was stuffed full of toilet paper, and a rank smell drifted toward me—semen mixed with other body fluids, I knew it!

I ran back to my room and vomited uncontrollably.

Why did I want to push open her door? I don't understand why I wanted to prove what I already knew. It's as if I deliberately, desperately wanted to remember, to remember the relations between my mother and those men, so that I could fight against them for the rest of my life.

I was thirteen then. I had just got my period, but I knew so many things that young girls shouldn't know. Aside from the sex education I got at school in health class, I knew so much about guilt and hatred.

I can't sort out the order of my memories of the past; my recollections are scattered and fragmentary. They vacillate and shift between imagination and dreams, confused to blankness by shame and hatred. Trying to find the pattern, I find I can't piece together the full story.

The source of all the confusion is the year I turned ten, I remember. My tenth year is like a boundary forged of iron: On the right of the border, I am an ordinary child in an ordinary family; on the left of the border, I allow myself to become the slave of terror and hatred.

That year, my young father got into a car accident on his way home from work. The other driver fled, and my father lay unconscious in a pool of blood for I don't know how long. My mother ran about frantically, swearing that she would nurse him back to health,

but two weeks later, he departed, amid the bitter weeping of Mother and Grandpa.

A month later, my mother vanished.

I lived in the countryside at my grandpa's house and became a child who couldn't speak. Facing my old grandpa, the tears trailing down his face, I couldn't speak and I couldn't cry.

I was so scared, terrified that as soon as I opened my mouth, this nightmare would turn real. Rather I should face any kind of pain and open my eyes to find it had all been just a terrifying dream, and as soon as light came, all the hurt would disappear with the dark night.

I didn't speak, yet day after day it became light, and everything was still real. When I woke up in the morning, the sunshine sparkled just like before. Before me there was only my gradually aging grandpa, my father in his black-and-white photograph on the remembrance shrine, and my vanished mother circulating uncertainly in the confused rumors of the townspeople.

"A'Su, why can't I just love her or hate her? Why can't I give her a chance to live?"

I sucked A'Su's nipple, missing my own infancy, missing the ageless, equally beautiful nipple of my mother's body, thinking of my love that had died so quickly and so young. Without realizing it, I started to cry.

I knew from the start that A'Su made her living out of men's desire for her. She moved under their greedy gaze, preening in her beauty and arrogance. Nobody could possess her.

The night she gathered me up, drunken and confused, and brought me home, she said I was crying and laughing at the same time and threw up all over her. After I woke up, I sat blankly on the bed for a long time before she pushed open the door and walked in.

"I'm A'Su. Why don't you live here from now on! I can see right away you're a homeless spirit."

Yes, A'Su, I have no home. The apartment my mother bought me is an empty shell, and the three-*ping* basement room near the university for which I pay exorbitant rent is inhabited only by my books

and my body.⁵ The apartments of men like FK are my safe harbor. With my face of an angel I drift and float about in the world, unsettled as a solitary ghost. What I'm seeking is in fact a grave on which to lay my corrupted and empty soul to rest.

A'Su's big flat, where different men came and went, made me think of home; A'Su's pervasive, rank body smell made me feel secure.

This is how I entered her bizarre, magnificent world. During the day I'd take a lift to the university in her Jaguar; at night I accompanied her on the endless round of cocktail parties of wealthy businessmen. I woke up one night to find a famous architect I knew from the newspapers, lying naked between me and A'Su, his shriveled penis like a wretched, dirty old man. Compared to her, how could you call my mother wicked and sluttish?

Apart from her beauty, intelligence, and chilly manner, A'Su's only weapons were wantonness and lack of feeling; her complete mistrust and indifference toward men made her the winner in every contest.

All my poor mother had was a rumpled bed and a wounded and despairing heart.

Those men with their pockets stuffed full of cash yearned for A'Su's body; A'Su yearned to awaken my already silent, still love. What did I yearn for?

Death. After my mother died I would have happily lain beside her in the grave.

I sat at the bar, writing. The Bloody Marys FK was mixing today were sour as bile, simply undrinkable. This was the first time I'd been back to the bar after A'Su and I got together.

"FK, what's wrong with you today? This Bloody Mary tastes like horse piss." I lifted my head and looked at him, and saw that he suddenly looked feeble and aged.

"I've known A'Su for over two years, and I've never seen her look at anyone the way she looks at you. Cao-Cao, she's in love with you." FK sat beside me and downed half a glass of vodka in a single draught.

"In the beginning, I only wanted her body, which was hard enough. It took a lot of effort and a lot of money waiting for the day she'd feel like going to bed with me. Of course, some had an even harder time than me, throwing cash at her, and slam, she was gone, you needn't even think about touching the tip of her finger.

"After we finally made love, I lay beside her, longing to embrace her; but she pushed my hand away and stood up, gazing down at me with a small smile, and recited a poem by Baudelaire.

"Cao-Cao, I knew I was finished, what I wanted wasn't just to come inside her body. All of a sudden I was in love with her.

"She said, 'Don't waste your money, it won't get you anywhere.' She was right, it didn't get me anywhere! I always thought she was a cold-blooded animal, only now I see that it's women she loves! I'll never have any hope with her."

FK's face revealed a wounded look that I'd never seen before. A'Su was in love with me? I knew that, but so what? So what? I thought of the intricate bonds between the three of us—everything was so absurd. Could those pretty hands of FK's bring music from A'Su's body?

A'Su, if it's women you love, do you love your mother? Are you in constant pain because of the ambivalence of your love and your hatred for her?

When I started middle school my mother wanted me to move in with her. As a result, I attended a prestigious middle school.

Wherever we moved—hotels, hostels, cheap apartments, or exclusive retreats—I always had my own room and an endless supply of pocket money. I had no friends, only a whole room full of books and records and my silent self.

We seldom spoke. She often came home helplessly drunk in the middle of the night with her old women friends from before—a mob of pretty, fashionable women with their high-heeled shoes in their hands, now crying, now laughing, in the street.

Once, I awoke with a start in the middle of the night to find her at the foot of my bed, crying. I pretended to continue sleeping, but I

couldn't fall asleep again. The next day at school I dozed the whole day, and when I came home, we still looked at each other with the same cold eyes.

My feelings for her had died the year I was twelve; no matter how I tried now, my efforts only brought us more pain. I had to face the pressure of the final exams, all the while fighting off her concern and love for me. The desire just born in my adolescent self was tormented out of any semblance of the human.

At last, I passed the entrance exams for the high school of my preference, which meant that I could move away from my mother. She read the notification of my acceptance into the school and gave me a rare, brilliant smile. The next day she bought me a whole set of translated novels. The array of deep-blue dust jackets billowed and rolled before my eyes like seawater.

"Don't lie on your bed reading all the time; you'll damage your eyes."

She placed the books one by one onto the bookshelf, not looking at me while she was speaking. I picked up a book. The bookshelf wasn't high, but somehow I couldn't manage to put the book into it.

I began to cry for the first time in ages, behind her back, silently, tears falling drop by drop onto the pages of the book. It was Camus' *The Stranger*.

I soon moved to the student apartments near the school, and the games began between me and the men. I was like a flower infected with a disease: Open at its most dazzling time, its heart is already rotten.

"Cao-Cao, I love you. Though I know that what you need is not my love, I still love you. If I couldn't love you, my life wouldn't be fulfilled."

I lay fallen dejectedly among the discarded writing paper, bemoaning my feeble narrative abilities. A'Su extended a hand and lifted my chin. Under her sea of disheveled hair her gaze was hollow, an enormous black hole wanting to swallow me. I was stunned: Was this how she looked when she loved someone?

I took her into my arms and kissed and caressed her over and over.

A'Su, I don't understand. I don't understand what part of myself could be worth loving. I don't understand the way that you love me. I understand even less why the women who love me always throw themselves among the desires of men, and bit by bit grow hollow and age before my eyes. If neither of us loved the other, if we just expended our energy making love, wouldn't our days be happier?

I don't understand love. I only know that in the arms of men, my body was cold and numb, and under A'Su's caress I came back to life, ignited with hot fire. I became sensitive and savage, as though every pore on my body was open wide and breathing, the slightest touch making me shiver and quickening my breath.

"A'Su, I want you; even though I can't love yet, I still want you. You're the woman I've waited for all my life. Only through you can I be reunited with my self."

I really can't clearly remember many things about my mother.

When I was in high school, rushing between school and the men, my work remained consistently of the highest standard. I went through boyfriend after boyfriend. I could deal easily with the things that normally bother high-school students, but I couldn't get even one of the things that I really wanted. The set of books my mother gave me held me back from the brink of collapse. On nights when I tossed and turned and couldn't sleep, I'd read Kafka and masturbate.

Every month on the moonless nights, I'd have dinner with my mother in restaurants with gentle light and soft music, face to face, each of us smoking, silent, or making a bit of meaningless conversation.

I don't know if there was too much pepper on the steak, or if the cigarette smoke stung her eyes. Her eyes were moist, though, and under them the skin was slightly dark, crawling with minute wrinkles under the thick makeup. She laughed as though she had been observed falling over on filthy ground, her whole body becoming clumsy and awkward.

Sometimes the phone rang in the middle of the night. She would be choking with sobs on the other end of the line; the smell of alcohol drifted up from the hand set, giving me a headache.

I knew that we'd reached the limit, although all we had to do was reach out to each other and we could have saved each other from the edge of despair. But we never did—or could it be that we'd both exhausted ourselves stretching out our arms but ultimately were mistaken about the other's direction?

I could never look back.

Until I met A'Su.

She was so much like my mother, so much that after each time we made love, my dreams would be full of things I'd cast away or forgotten. One by one, they reasserted themselves in my memory; as I drowned, drunken in A'Su's salacious laugh, I discovered out of nowhere my misunderstanding of my mother.

Step by step I approached my mother's naked soul and realized that all along I had been cruelly unfair to her. Yes, it was my selfishness and cowardice that pushed us toward the abyss.

I remember. Mother, I am gradually remembering your face after you took off your makeup, your eyes fine slits as your eyelids swell up after crying, exactly the same as the you that I loved in my childhood!

The summer vacation after I passed my university entrance exams, I took a job in a Western-style restaurant, began to grow my hair, and learned to drive.

One evening in the middle of September, when I finished work I found my mother sitting outside the restaurant in an Austin Mini, her tall frame making a peculiar contrast with the small body of the car. I got into the car and saw that she wasn't wearing makeup and was dressed head-to-toe in pure white. She drove determinedly. I had no idea where she could be headed in the dark.

We came to the graveyard where my father was buried. This was the first time, the first time after Father died that I had been here with her.

The nighttime graveyard was so calm and quiet. Amid the tall miscanthus grass, fireflies flew here and there. In her white shirt and white skirt, my mother moved slowly through the grass under the silver-white moonlight, like a beautiful female ghost floating above the earth.

"This is Cao-Cao, our child. Isn't she beautiful! She's as clever as you. She's not ungrateful to you; she's passed the university entrance exams. We've finally seen her to adulthood. And I miss you so much..."

The night breeze rustled. Her voice was bright and clear, light and happy, like the humming voices of primary-school children on their way home after class. I looked at the headstone with Father's name on it. The mound was covered with weeds like his disheveled hair, and the father I'd forgotten suddenly appeared before my eyes, riding his old bicycle, his black-framed glasses on his nose, shouting out while still a great distance from the gate, "Cao-Cao, Daddy's home!"

He was still just as young.

I turned my head to look at my mother and noticed that she had cut her hair, and her round, smiling face had become very childlike. She squatted on the earth, her hands gently stroking the headstone as though caressing the chest of the man she loved, her face overfilled with joy.

At that moment I suddenly wanted to hold her tight, to tell her out loud that I loved her, that I'd really loved her all along, that no matter what she'd done, nothing could change the way I loved her.

But I didn't. Even though my heart was boiling, my body remained rigid as a stone; I couldn't move. It was all too late.

I don't know whether if I'd been able to embrace her bravely and let her know my true feelings, she might have altered her decision. I don't think so. Things couldn't change at that point. What I had was just a momentary impulse; in fact, I hadn't yet really forgiven her, nor forgiven myself.

Three days later she killed herself. Her naked body floated in the bath, and from her right wrist flowed a blood-red stream.

I lost her and gained the considerable sum of her savings, an apartment of over 30 *ping*, and the Austin Mini.

Once I started university I became a person with no past, half-floating, half-sinking, all in alcohol. Also, I began to write frenetically.

A'Su was always a riddle. Our being together was like a dream. If I wasn't attending various bizarre events with her, then we'd stay at her place, drinking manically, smoking, rolling around and making love, talking and laughing, or just murmuring fragmentary phrases to one another. When A'Su wasn't there, I'd either write furiously or sink into daydreams as I struggled to piece together my memories. No ordinary, concrete details exist around which to organize a description of our life together. We never worried or asked about the other's private matters; moreover, we had no idea about each other's background, past, or even full name.

"There's nothing so idiotic as wanting another person to understand one utterly and completely." This was A'Su's motto.

She was always a riddle. But the riddle's answer wasn't important. Myself, I never bother trying to uncover other people's secrets, since what concerns me is the meaning they carry.

I felt vaguely aware of something, somewhere awaiting me, waiting for me to approach it, and then I would understand. I had been searching bitterly for so many years, and my efforts had all been in vain, until A'Su appeared; her appearance was the sign guiding me. What was I searching for? What would I understand? I didn't know.

"What we need is a pair of wings. If we found them, we could fly freely once more." A'Su said that at the beginning. Because of it I had written a story called "Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel." Now the story is nearing its end. A'Su, what about our wings?

"Cao-Cao, you just have to keep on writing, and on the paper you'll see me, and you'll see yourself. Everything I've done has been to show you this one thing. Write, never stop writing, you have no other choice. It is your fate. The moment I first saw you, I saw in your face the fervor of a writer. That fervor brought me into your life."

"Write — A'Su, I know I have to write; but what about the wings we've lost?" That night's conversation was our last.

"They're somewhere." She held my hand tightly; her palm was a little sweaty, trembling.

I dreamed about A'Su.

In the dream, we were floating in space, and surrounding us was a translucent icelike substance. As we drifted here and there our bodies caught on fire, and we rolled around deliriously in the fierce flames, passionately making love. Our life to us was so fragile, yet in the eyes of others we were no more than smoke and dust.

Abruptly, A'Su let go of my hand and flew away. My eyes opened wide as I watched her fly upward. She flew farther and farther away, grew more and more distant, but I couldn't shake off my bonds, and I felt the pressure all around me increase.

"A'Su! Save me!"

I cried out loud and woke up. I only remember that A'Su called out just once from space: "Cao-Cao, you must rely on yourself."

When I woke up, I found I was lying in the basement room where I had lived before.

The desk was covered in paper scrawled with words. Its title was "Searching for the Lost Wings of the Angel," and on the last page were written two words: The End.

The story was finished! "A'Su, look! The story is finished," I shouted out loud. But A'Su? Why was I back at the old place, and why was A'Su not here to be seen? She was clearly there in the story, but where on earth had she gone?

I gathered up the draft, deciding to go out and look for her.

I stepped out the door and into the dazzling sunlight. I stood stupidly at the intersection as car after car flew past in front of my eyes; when the red light went off, the green light came on; when the green light went off, the yellow light came on. I stared at the bustling crowds of people, tears dropping suddenly from my eyes.

I couldn't think; I suddenly couldn't think where A'Su lived. I had absolutely no clue—which road, which number, which floor—I had no idea! Meticulously, I searched every detail of the story, but there was nothing there, nothing at all! I didn't even know her name.

What was going on?

I thought of FK. He was sure to know where A'Su was!

"A'Su? Who's A'Su? I'd remember any pretty woman, but I don't know any A'Su!" FK shook his head back and forth.

"No no, really, there's no one called A'Su. Cao-Cao, are you drunk?"

I'd lost her! Clutching the draft, I wandered blindly around the streets. My body was still soaked with A'Su's rank smell. How could I be wrong about that obscene smell?

When night fell, I went back to the place where I lived and lay paralyzed on the bed, poring over everything about A'Su.

"I'm A'Su." I still clearly remembered A'Su's speaking voice, deep and husky. When she laughed, it was wild and clear. When we walked in the street, all the men would look at her, but her eyes looked only at me, appraising me from head to toe, as though her gaze could slowly strip off my clothes, making me awkward, my face turning red, my heart jumping.

"Cao-Cao, how can you be so beautiful? My underpants are soaked just looking at you." She lowered her head and spoke softly next to my ear and lightly bit my earlobe.

I still remember how A'Su liked to lie on my stomach, her finger playing over my private part, caressing me, and sing:

*"Be good little goat, open up the door;
Open it quickly, I want to come in."*

I would stifle my moans and, trembling, finish the song:

*"I won't, I won't, I can't open the door.
You're the big bad wolf, I won't let you in."*

We would burst out laughing and roll around on the bed, roll down onto the floor, and make love until we were too exhausted to go on.

I remember the first time A'Su read my story. After she finished it, she lifted my face, and held it there for a long time, sighing a long sigh.

“Ai! Cao-Cao, you really drive a person mad.”

Don't I remember everything? A'Su, I wrote my story for you, but where have you gone?

I don't know how many days passed. During the day I wandered the streets, looking for A'Su's shadow in everyone I saw; at night I lay on my bed recalling again and again A'Su's scent.

Then, gradually, my memories became confused—I almost couldn't be sure if she had really existed, or if she was just a dream.

“Somewhere.” I remembered what A'Su had said. Somewhere—the answer must be there.

Where?

I have to find it. I'll jump onto a bus, I'll board a train, even catch a plane. I don't know how I'll do it, but I know a voice is calling me, and I'm gradually getting nearer to it.

To my surprise, I find I've come to a graveyard.

A grave? What I'm searching for turns out to be a grave.

Next to my father's grave lies another one. I approach it; carved on the slab of marble of the tombstone are some characters:

SU QING-YU

Su Qing-yu; that is my mother's name.

Mother, I've come back. After fleeing you for so many years, I've finally come back.

I lie before my mother's grave as though curled in her womb, mumbling. I describe to her the feelings I've never revealed. It's as painstaking as learning to speak. After all the time I have wandered and floated about, this is the first time I feel the firm solidness of the earth; at last I can distinguish my feelings for my mother.

“I love you, absolutely.”

Dimly, I hear A'Su's laugh from the sky. I lift my head and see the clouds gradually forming into a familiar shape, swaying back and forth, back and forth. . . .

It's a pair of wings.

NOTES

1. A'Su is a nickname derived from a name containing the character "Su," most likely as a surname. *Trans.*

2. NT\$500 is equivalent to about US\$15.

3. This refers to Taichung First Girls' School, an academically prestigious girls' high school in Taichung. *Trans.*

4. A *píng* is a measure of floor area, six feet square, used in measuring housing. *Trans.*

5. See note 4 above.

POEM FROM THE GLASS WOMB



HONG LING

Taiwan's premier writer of queer gothic and vampire fiction, Hong Ling (b. 1971), also known as Lucifer Hung, is a key member of the new generation of lesbian and gay authors. She holds a master's degree in English literature from the University of Sussex, and her prolific output from the mid-1990s includes seven novels, five collections of critical and theoretical essays, and three collections of short stories. She was a key participant in Taipei's emerging *tongzhi* public sphere during much of the 1990s, presenting papers at academic conferences and maintaining an influential presence in Taiwan's *nütongzhi* Internet culture while also publishing her fiction and critical writings. Hong's fiction has been analyzed in articles that sit alongside her own literary-critical essays in several *tongzhi*-themed journal issues throughout the decade. Hong's writing is as marked by its sly references to contemporary queer scholarship as it is by the generic conventions of science fiction, vampire fiction, and fantasy fiction. In line with the stylistic eclecticism of this generation of authors, Hong Ling has also experimented, in her *Cosmic*

Odyssey novel series, with a fictional narrative that draws in part from the conventions of Japanese *manga* cartoons.

This story was published in an anthology of lesbian and gay writing from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, *His Stories, Her Stories* (ed. Lu Jianxiong, 1996). It provides an interesting counterpoint to Chen Xue's story, dealing as it does with a sexualized mother-daughter relationship, albeit in a slightly more wry and playful manner. Also like Chen's story, it emphasizes the powerful effects of writing itself, through the central character who is also an avant-garde queer poet. Like the works of Qiu, Chen, and Chi (this volume), both the up-to-the-minute narrative style and the contemporary, *noirish* urban settings of this story mark it clearly as a piece of "new generation" queer fiction.



I am running away from you, Mama.

In the process of drawing away from you, I want to discover your substance, what makes you you, your essential *raison d'être*—like the moon to the wolf girl, the narcissus flower to its reflection, the writer to words.

Smuggling your scream and your secret notebook of literary commentary, I rushed out the door. All my internal organs were full of hot, angry fire and your accusations: Why was I so vile? Why couldn't I be sympathetic to you? You overindulge me, but you don't understand me at all! You try to embrace me in your own way, but I repay you by savagely trampling you, with a cold smile!

Your last scream was like a broken water bottle, glass dashing against liquid, your sorrowful sobs cutting me to the bone.

—You're mad, and so am I! The maddest thing I ever did was give birth to you!

On my journey I want to think of a poem, or at least pluck the key word from the fantastical abyss. I need only find the sign and enter it into my body—like a computer hacker finding the secret code to hack into the Internet's womb, tapping it out fluently on the keyboard! And then everything will fall naturally into place like water

finding its path, and I will be able to enter the swamp once more;
eternally, infinitely falling, falling. . . .

The first time I touched Aquaria the whole world moistened and became a giant swamp.

Her fingers described my five senses, her cool lips moved back and forth across my neck. My body writhed and became an electrified suction cup, ceaselessly churning the sheets.

My love followed her caress and gushed from within my body. She half knelt, her ankle holding down my thigh, that silver chain inlaid with sapphires brushing my pelvis. I tried hard to see her expression clearly, but only her vacant smile showed through the gaps in her disheveled hair.

Her mouth broke open in a grin, revealing sharp white teeth and a pink tongue-tip that appeared and was gone. Then without warning she drew close to my earlobe and nibbled it gently. A voice like a cello flowed softly into my dazed mind.

"Shelly, I want to fall . . ."

Her voice lost itself in the passages of my ear. I couldn't hear and couldn't see; the only thing to hold on to was Aquaria's hair, lying on my chest. That hair was like soft water-weeds in the depths of the swamp, no sooner dragged up than they slip from the hand, streaming toward my deep, my bottomless womb.

Mama dear, you can't hear me talking to myself now, but I can clearly feel you lying hidden beneath my skin.

Right now it's after midnight, and I'm sitting bored out of my mind on a little train speeding toward the southern tip of the island. Outside the window the moon is like a biscuit with one corner missing, dispersing its gory yellow rays. I'm holding tightly to the gray buckskin bag on my knee. My palms are cold, but the bag gives off waves of warmth. Suddenly I feel my bladder become swollen and painful, and I hold tighter to the bag.

Do you remember? It's the present you gave me on my nineteenth birthday, along with the silver chain you fastened to my ankle. You narrowed your eyes and laughed mischievously, saying you wanted to put a collar on the kitten. At the time I let you toy with me in silence, memorizing the witchlike expression you wear when you're pleased with yourself.

Say, Mama, from that time on I started writing poems.

I pull the theme from your mouth and search for phrases and images in your vagina. I crave you extremely and I itch to thoroughly hurt you. And now isn't my "insane condition" the most wondrous poem? A young poet fleeing on a wintry night, in my arms a stolen, sinister secret, and behind me a trail of wildly anxious editors, media, and intimate friends assiduously following my trail.

They tried to hang me in the square: a fin-de-siècle mutant animal to be exhibited. The interesting thing was that my deranged, immoral face and words turned into prized showcase items highly sought after on Taipei's literary scene.

Even my quarrels and intrigues with those involved in the so-called *tongzhi* movement;¹ the fact that I move within the absurd, empty world of the "alternative scene of the new new generation"; the fact that I've beaten up male cops—all this turned into finger food that they selected to accompany their Angel's Kisses, Bloody Marys, or Taiwan Beer.

Actually, it means nothing to me. I've always shown myself to the world with my toothy, open-mouthed face of a devil, while they continue to stare enraged at me as if with a love that can't bear to let go, gnashing their teeth and scanning my defenseless text and desire.

"A collusive relation with the high structuralism of mainstream literature's elite tower"! This ludicrous clown of a headline was the label given to me by a *tongzhi* "godfather." He thought he'd cut me in two, but he didn't realize alien bodies can reproduce asexually, one into two into four into eight. . . .

But even that game gets tedious after a while. It's been a long time now since I've written the kind of thing you die as you write. Right now I'm just concentrating on struggling with you, arguing with

POEM FROM THE GLASS WOMB

you, making love with you! I need some kind of solitary, frozen space where I can drip my blood, where I can write, where I can think continuously about how to call to you. . . .

Silent words are my pistol. During the time I'm away from you, I want you to listen attentively to me, my willful, voiceless lovesong. Phrases from my poems will twine constantly around inside you, even if you think you've long been a corpse.

I've always felt that I've long been a drowned corpse, detained by some nameless force and living on, thieflike, in the mortal world against my own principles.

In recent years my only significance has been Aquaria. I realized long ago that I'll never in this life achieve anything worthwhile to fend off the hopelessness and the emptiness. But I retain a desire that I can't relinquish, splitting open voicelessly like a flower.

I used to think that as soon as the notes collapsed, the senses would freeze along with them. I remember somebody said the dead can't speak. But my dead can't listen to the notes. The lonely purity of sacred Gregorian chants once let me achieve orgasms on the brink of death. But afterward I couldn't enter music's temple and was forced to linger in the damp, voiceless world.

I was parted by death from life's brilliance when that girl took away my voice and her own life.

Her name was Sandy, but she possessed a voice and skin as lustrous as silk. When we had loved to the brink of the destined catastrophe, she said she couldn't stand it any more, couldn't stand life and couldn't stand me, but she didn't want to let me go. . . .

With a kiss she poured mercury into my voice box, destroying our history and our love along with my voice. Finally she bathed herself in alcohol and essence of black cherry, then lit a match on the abundant bubbles, incinerating the body she was so proud of.

When Sandy died I had nothing. Only the embryo slumbering in my womb, lying together with me in the icy, voiceless swamp.

I'm getting farther and farther away from Taipei, Mama.

That means I'm also getting farther and farther away from my home, my memories, and everything we share.

Just now, even that sleazy salaryman finally alighted, leering, from the train. I sit in the deserted carriage and place the bag above my head. I want to hear something . . . for example, the sound of rain melting into a lake.

That sound is second only to silence, you told me. At the time I was only six.

Rain dripping on the surface of a lake and sliding without trace into the maternal water body made up of countless water drops. That sound is what you miraculously hear when you're making love and you put your ear between your partner's labia, a black hole silently sucking in the wreckage of desire.

Child, my black hole is the womb that bore you.

Trembling, I want to enter you, enter my homeland. But you tell me, aggrieved, that it's impossible. You are unable to let me go back.

Like a dried-up lake, unable to let fishes swim in it again.

My world after Sandy's act of arson was as dried out as a fish without water. The ridiculous thing was that I could feel my womb full of water, and inside, a part of me floating unconsciously, sharing with me the kind of extreme pain that leads to an impulse to laugh wildly.

Why did I go on living? Without Sandy, without my voice, I was nothing—even a rock band that played in minor bars wouldn't want me with this broken soprano of mine! Even the child wasn't my idea.

—My Shelly, I want a child. The child of me and you.

—But, Sandy . . .

—I beg you! I want one myself, but I can't. Thinking of a living thing squirming inside my own body, I'd go mad! But, you are able . . .

Selfish thing! Why should I be able? To this day I still often dream that I'm lying in the artificial insemination clinic, covered only with a plastic robe, my privates utterly exposed to the eyes of the doctors and nurses manipulating their instruments. The scariest nightmare is that they don't anesthetize me! But I can't stop wriggling about, my

eyes wide open, looking at that big, thick syringe—full to the brim with thick white semen, and Sandy's ovum, roughly entering my body.

Fortunately, the procedure was nothing like that in reality. Everything was extremely professional, clean, and smooth. And I didn't experience that most terrifying vaginal birth; at the time, I tried to cut open my own eight-months-pregnant belly, and the wound was so deep the doctor advised that the most straightforward solution would be to perform a speedy caesarian.

Thus was the ludicrous union of the stabbed belly of a suicide with the opened belly of a caesarian! Before I was completely unconscious—having taken a handful of sleeping pills and some whiskey a while before—I couldn't stop giggling as I felt a continuous flow of slippery liquid oozing from my body. All that was left of me was a withered shell.

Precisely because black holes are dried up, they must continuously swallow, Mama. It was only later I understood that the first bedtime story you told me was in reality a terrifying poem.

We were living at a retreat in Tienmu at the time.² For the moment, you weren't attended by that dreary, clamorous swarm of female and male lovers like bees, and I became your exclusive all-purpose doll and pet. Occasionally you'd have a whim and teach me to play Bach's fugues. You even slept with me every night, vaguely mumbling stories or bits of gossip that even you couldn't make out clearly.

What I remember most vividly is the thing about black holes. It's strange—thinking back now, I don't know if these are really things you said, or if my memory is playing tricks on me, twisting dream scenes to seem like real experiences.

It's like this. When the latent energy of a star is all used up, it slowly contracts into the interior of its own body, so that the ratio of mass to volume gets more and more out of balance. After it becomes a neutron star, the old star can't stabilize, and finally the whole thing

falls in on itself, eating itself up, turning inside out to become the most terrifying thing in the universe: a black hole that digests everything.

My Aquaria, she is my water carrier, my venomous scorpion. From the moment I first saw her, covered in placenta and bloodstains, forced out of my body into the world, I fell in love with her.

She is my own cells split and nurtured; she used my body as a conduit to come from that mysterious sphere into this moment, to meet with me and be the object of my love. I've never thought of myself as a mother. I don't love her in such a boring way.

Since adolescence I've been a dissident in the kingdom of love. Logically, this ought to be a tortuous, forking path, tumbling and climbing its way between the rose's petals and its sharp thorns. However, the combined factors of the early passing of my parents, my maternal relatives, who scuttle crablike in the upper echelons of state and finance, and the huge family fortune, added up to an exceptionally fine fate akin to winning the world's biggest lottery. What was even better was that as the utterly pampered only daughter, I didn't have to share this super-duper bargain package of freedom and resources with any other direct heirs in my generation.

In this way, the goddess of fate exempted me from most of the unpleasantness of battling the system. There was no need for me to be like those girls who are forced to find all manner of ways of disguising themselves, struggling under the pressures of the family and the system, even smothering the queer flowers that grow out of their own bodies.

Yes, Satan's dice rolled the crucial number and allowed me to live in a glass palace for the elite classes. I knew clearly that I needed bodies, different bodies; men and women came and went around me like my own living waxworks of bodies. But with the end of the carnal union, like a momentary electric shock, everything else fell despondently away. After the magic loses its power, Cinderella keeps struggling in the dirt, and the frog must return to the bottom of the

well to await the next passerby, indiscriminate with hunger, with whom to exchange the hurried kiss. Each body was the same; none aroused my desire to touch it again.

Only Sandy was different. The brief time I was with her made me feel life was full of fresh possibilities; having her, I needed no longer anxiously to crave, searching different bodies for that fragile spark, then after one night of pleasure, bidding hello to nauseating disappointment. With her, the insatiable demon inside me was filled with heart-piercing, bone-slashing shudders. The most beautiful shudders, whose tide never went out.

But Sandy died. She couldn't bear my all-or-nothing rule. She drowned in my absolute possessiveness.

Afterward, I thought I was doomed, especially after Sandy's funeral. I had been planning a death to compare with hers, but the result of the failure of my belly-stabbing created in me a passion to go on living. When the doctor pulled Aquaria out from my messily slashed belly I saw her tightly pursed little mouth and her deep black eyes, oddly round and wide, looking unwaveringly at me, looking at my body in its pandemonium, my ruined womb.

It's frightening! The moment I saw that child I forgot everything, forgot my own wound and my death wish. I no longer wanted to die. The palpitations between my legs told me that my life from then on would be a theater of incomparably grotesque fantasy.

But the great dream-cloud pool is no longer a swamp. Can I really return to that time, return to a self that has faith in absolute love?

You are that primordial lake called Great Dream-Cloud Pool.

Since the chaos of the primitive age, the once-plentiful water world has been encroached upon incessantly by sand, has accumulated silt, and the water weeds and algae that grew in the heart of your lake have gradually become extinct, until in the end you became a piece of land that people developed for farming. According to the will of this world, you compromised, letting the vultures and the ravaging beasts gnaw you, skin and bone.

The world is not completely wrong, only too foolish. As a female composer of unusual talent, you live alone in the luxury residence of a respectable, well-established family, with position, fortune, and expressive talent regarded with envy by the majority of ordinary people. You don't have a regular lover, only a daughter who specializes in causing trouble and is steeped in antisocial behavior like a black man unable to remove the color of his own skin. Your existence is a vicious slap in the face to this world, constructed as it is on the standard of humility.

But my existence, what is it to you? A fatal curse? In those sweet, violent times you lay on the shiny black silk sheets, your burning body like a dripping volcanic eruption, smothering my everything. You spoke beside my ear like a snake-catcher pacifying his tiny prey, you said I was your life's light and water. Without me, you would wither and die; without me, you would be like the seer with his eyes gouged out, walking alone in the barren desert's nothingness.

You say again and again that as long as I'm there you don't need anyone else. But, dear Mama, we both know that the Queen must have more than one knight.

In any case I'm not a knight. I'm just a poet dissatisfied with the status quo, with the slightest touch of bloodlust.

From the time she was a little child, I've never understood Aquaria. But one thing I understand very clearly: No matter how little I understand her emptiness and rebellion, I remain deeply bewitched by those qualities.

Whether it's the poetry she writes; the experimental short V8 films she makes; the recalcitrant friends she associates with; the many serious conflicts she's had all her life with guidance counselors, homeroom teachers, disciplinary officers, psychotherapists, and the police—I'm powerless to intervene in any of it, and I don't understand it.

From the time she started high school, I used my so-called special contacts to keep her at all costs from being expelled. No matter how many classes she skipped or how many times she cursed out the male

disciplinary officer, she continued haughtily to wear her green uniform and ride her converted 250cc racer. I don't know how many times she changed the partner riding on the back, but they were all little girls like white butterflies, head over heels for her.

When she went to university, her tooth-baring, claw-flashing terrorist appeal was under even less restraint, and the radius of the hurricane grew wider and wider. Her words were like the sunglasses that grew on her skin, impossible to remove, making her readers and editors mad to pierce through to what lay beneath the words and peek into her secret realm. Like relentless rain, her cold and lofty yet delicate appearance attracted countless prey willingly into her net. But they were only little appetizer crackers whose flavor she merely tasted before throwing away.

Once, her prey was unwilling to accept the fate of being cast aside, and set her teeth to come visit her, then rapidly collapsed before her unmoved countenance. That was the first time I felt disillusionment and terror. It was as though Aquaria got happiness from the girl's weeping, a cold-blooded joy.

All of this is too cruel, too brutal, like Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* opera cycle. She plays all of the roles—the tenacious hero, the merciless warlike virgin, the evil spirit, even the northern European race that goes willingly to its own destruction! All this excessive and violent behavior was just in order that she might experience extreme, heart-piercing pain, and enjoy the body-splitting, bone-shattering delight and annihilation that comes with it.

I was like a dumbfounded, gaping audience sitting on the sidelines, unable to do anything. If I restrained her, she would only become more savagely provoking and malicious.

The most terrifying thing was that when the girl produced a sharp-pointed fruit knife from her bag and hysterically made as if to stab herself to death right there, I saw the corners of Aquaria's mouth suffused with an uncaring smile. That smile had no feeling in it at all, only a little sneering mockery, as though she had just been inspired by a thrilling recital and felt insuppressibly excited about the words she was about to write.

As if the girl realized something, she halted the action of stabbing

herself. Probably she was already thoroughly bereft of hope. How could she go through with it in front of this person to whom even a lover dying before her very eyes was cause for laughter? In that instant of bewilderment, Aquaria thrust out her hand and snatched the knife from the girl's grasp, then indifferently cut a shallow wound in her own wrist.

Like a kitten with no compassion whatever, after licking clean her own bleeding wound, she said to the shattered girl, "This is my love for you. It's not love unto death, in fact it's nothing at all."

I forget how that scene concluded. What I can't wipe from my mind are those words of hers and her expression. I really don't understand her, I don't understand what it is that she wants!

What I fear even more is that she may one day treat me the same way, flashing her trademark smile that casts all else aside, and tell me that she certainly doesn't love me unto death. I'm afraid that would be crueler than death itself.

Lying in this decrepit old guesthouse, the water stains on the ceiling metamorphose weirdly into lots of different faces; the last face is yours. The motley paint makes your face the color of a congealed scab, and the many scars on my wrists all begin suddenly to ache faintly.

In the end I had no choice but to alight from the train at the last station, and drift through the cold, crisp streets. It isn't winter, but the island's south is cloaked in a typhoon current. The bright shop signs tremble in the wind and make awkward clanging sounds, just like those respectable young ladies in the heat of passion—you can't know how much I hate them! Especially the way they make themselves sentimental, mistake a scoundrel for a king, and then think that I'll accompany them nicely in some false, affected court waltz!

Wrong, completely and utterly wrong. If you want to be my adversary, if you're not an arsonist of passion, then at least you should be someone who takes the roles of both saint and killer, like Xueyi.

You can't forget her, Xueyi; she almost took me away. The last gift she gave me is the biggest, thickest wound on my right wrist, which remained bright red even after it healed. The look of that girl when she set her heart with hate simply fills me with uncontrollable passion. Every time I think of the scene when she thrust the engraved copper dagger toward my wrist, I can't stop the trembling in my private parts, and I just have to masturbate.

Her blood and mine sprayed out at once, splashing the snow-white pillow with peach blossoms. Her hair fell and her face was colder than ice; her delicate body trembled violently. Her eyes were like two burning coals, looking right through me to the very marrow of my bones.

That was the most unforgettable sight I've ever seen, carved into my bones and imprinted on my heart. It was also my most dripping, delightful lovemaking. I caressed her with my wounded hand all the way down, and every inch of her skin was inscribed with yearning and hatred for me. But if you asked her to admit her desire and love for me, she'd rather die.

Finally she pushed me away hard. My lips were still covered with the fluid of her private parts, and my shoulders still bore the bloody marks of her bites. I grabbed her and shook her as if to kill her. Her trembling snow-white throat arched obstinately high, making me want to strangle her, or to use love bites and teeth marks to break her unassailable dignity—quite matchless, a solitude belonging only to the swan on the brink of death.

Anyway, she's dead now. The husband who claimed to forgive everything and scrupulously loved and protected her—no matter how he tried, he couldn't save her. Actually, he knew in his bones that Xueyi didn't love men. She often wrote in her stories, with great engagement and absorption, of "a youth with the gaze of a swan and the fate of a hyacinth who met a female snake- or scorpion-spirit, leading to his eternal downfall," et cetera. But all this was merely an attempt to find an outlet for the "woman-demon's love" that she could not and would not admit.

How stupid—could she really believe that she need only make

herself into a “youth” and everything would be all right? Yet, perhaps, in truth she need only not be “her,” not be the girl who drove me mad, and perhaps everything *would* be all right. I couldn’t write fatal love letters to any man, nor would I be able to probe that delectable body. Without desire, there would be no danger.

But because she was “her,” I desired her, and she couldn’t stand herself. After her attempt to kill me failed, her life was like a swan’s feather swallowed up by a black hole. Before her body truly died it was already ripped into scattered shreds.

Was it because of me? Did I ruin her life? Must everyone that encounters me meet with a bad end? Am I really a curse, a curse on life? Just like Xueyi’s husband at the funeral when he swore hysterically at me and said I should never have been born at all?

Tell me, Mama. Only you can answer this question.

Ultimately, she is a poet who can only write by constantly feeding on violence. Through writing, she’s able to some extent to relieve the bloodlust in her bones. If there came a time when slaying through writing no longer satisfied her, I think that would be the moment I lost her.

I no longer know how many days and nights it’s been. I haven’t moved an inch, lying amid a heap of objects awkwardly juxtaposed—the bone-china tea set she smashed, snow-white down all over the floor from a hole in the pillow, half a withered pear in the fruit dish, an alcohol lamp burned dry, jumbled shreds of a ripped notebook of literary commentary.

I can’t extricate myself from my thoughts, my mind is madly thinking: Where is she now? Has she got into another conflict with someone? Is she looking after herself properly? Will she be gone forever?

The red lights on the two separate answering machines that she and I use blink incessantly. They constantly overflow with delirious chitter-chatter, like a couple of broken-headed parrots. After a while I can hardly understand what the syllables mean.

—Greetings, Madame Shell Yeh, I am the general secretary, Cai

Xiuyi, of the Women Composer's Foundation. I don't know whether you received the invitation to our conference? May I trouble you to be in contact with me as soon as possible after hearing this message...

—Hi, little water-demon, it's me, Old Wai! Is the draft ready for this month's *Fathomless Isle Pit*?³ Where the hell have you gotten to, trawling for girls, right? Ha ha, take care of yourself! Don't overdo it, or you'll get too weak to even suck blood, heh heh...

—Hello, please is anyone there? I'm the violinist from the "F" group, Yang Jian. If Miss Yeh returns, can I trouble her to return my call... After our last collaboration, I've been wanting to chat further with Miss Yeh...

—Ah, Quarie, why are you ignoring me? I really miss you, I miss you to death. Are you there? I beg you, pick up the phone and listen, it's me, Little Ping!

—Is anyone alive there? Pick up the phone!

—
—

I remember that I've gotten up from my supine position and walked around a few times. Apart from going to the toilet, absently drinking water, and taking a small, all-but-frozen-solid cucumber from the fridge and gnawing on it, the last time I got up was when I picked up her headphones and randomly put one of her precious albums into the CD slot—"death metal" or "Gothic industrial noise" or some such, I didn't care what. I just wanted to drown my hearing with the loudest, sharpest noise, and block out the incessantly chattering answering machines. The ridiculous thing is that I could obviously pull out the phone cords, or switch off the volume of the answering machines. But I don't dare! What if—a chance in ten thousand, a chance in a billion—the voice on the other end were hers...

Putting on the headphones shaped like some sort of space helmet, I push the *play* button, stand up, and walk straight into the vacuum cleaner that's lying on the ground. I vaguely recall that the moment before our quarrel erupted I'd been vacuuming the carpet.

—Fuck you! Are you listening to me? I’m asking you, what kind of demon was Sandy! What’s the deal with her ovum? What in hell did the two of you create?! Tell me, tell it to me!

—I don’t know what you’re saying, I don’t know what you want! I don’t know!

—You know what? You ought to know I’ve had it up to here with your “not knowing” the exorcism incantation! Say another “don’t know” and I’m out of here right away!

I guess I just couldn’t change my ways and said another “I don’t know.” But how could she really walk out the door? Yet I truly am unsure, I don’t know what it was that I said.

On the vacuum cleaner’s brush are several dead-straight, ink-black hairs. It’s not mine, my hair is slightly wavy. It’s hers.

“Why don’t you hang me with your Medusa’s snake-hair...”

The hair and the words of the song flash past my eyes and in an instant sweep away the numbness of the past twenty years. When the notes sound out along with the lyrics, I truly hear the music. Strong liquor flowing down my throat and roaring into my veins, the music storms into me. Just like that time when I really heard the sound of the fetus violently churning in my blood-engorged womb.

I truly do hear it, my desire. . . .

In the bar I hear “her” voice—like nails on the cross, tapping sharply into my veins.

It’s a tiny place, smashed between a convenience store and an old bookstore. The narrow stairway leads me toward the basement, where on the thick steel door is sprayed in fluorescent pink the two words “The Labyrinth.” It must be the name of the place. The crude, shaky lettering is like one little scorpion after another creeping slowly in the desert, a mixture of innocence and provocation.

When I open the door the strong aroma of tequila seeps a wisp at a time into my nostrils. The air is peculiarly dry and crisp, lacking the stamp inevitably borne by most underground rooms: the damp, mildewy smell of the hidden den. Extending from the doorway where I stand, the dark space is divided into lots of little caverns. The bar is

the starting point, and there's also a stage floating in midair, and a second basement one floor beneath. H'm, not a bad labyrinth.

I choose a bar stool facing the stage and rest my tired feet on the empty seat beside me. Abruptly, a delicate voice rings out behind me. "There are many, many things in the Labyrinth."

I turn around and see a big, tall girl with her hair dyed scarlet, laughing across at me. In her hand she holds a glass and a cocktail mixer, and her fingers are long and powerful.

"I can make really weird drinks, want to try one?"

I look at her for a long moment. Not bad at all, even her eyeballs are blood-red—quite an effective color for contact lenses. I know I can't stop my lips from curling upward in a smile; nor can I stop myself from wanting to say something scary.

"Can you mix . . . the flavor of a back hole swallowing a womb?"

Unexpectedly, she is not stunned to silence, but laughs even more cheekily.

"I could try, but it wouldn't be based on alcohol."

Nine-Inch Nail is her name. Yet her voice isn't just a recalcitrant nail, but a bottomless hole luring any nail to fall into it. On the silk carpet inside the hole stand glittering shards of shattered glass. I look at her red hair, with just about every strand standing on end, and at her shining blood-pupils. My throat goes dry; grains of sand in my belly are stirred to life by the tornado.

I recognize that voice. It's the cassette tape I stumbled across once searching through the attic when I was young, from a time before I was born. An internationally acclaimed soprano singer—Shell Yeh. It was one of the few tapes that preserve her voice. I listened to it over and over again. In the final aria by the Lady of the Camellias on the verge of death, I discovered my own erogenous zone amid the rhythm of my body's uncontrollable convulsions.

Nine-Inch Nail isn't Shelly, I remind myself futilely, clutching my denim jacket close. Yet in the piercing notes of the heavy metal, I hear "her" ghost; that coloratura soprano I could never find. If she still exists, it means her lover Sandy—my other, dead mother—isn't dead, hasn't taken her voice. In that case, there's no room in her life for me.

*"Without me
How could you slake your thirst
Without me
The whole world would be your desert..."*

Between my legs is filled with something unknown, a very hot, very sweet flavor. I don't know whether this is a turning point, or just another riddle.

Nine-Inch Nail comes down from the stage and lifts the hair from my forehead. Her eyes are asking me, is this what I want?

Surely it is. I answer her voicelessly, looking into her blood-red eyes. In there is hidden a blood-red black hole.

Where can she be? The beginning of the eighth lunar leap month, just when the moon was the shape of a pointed sickle, was when she began to bleed.⁴

I so wanted to hug her, taste her and her blood. Every time she got her period she was so tender, weak, and lovable that I couldn't not caress her.

Ai, I'm wrong. The most contemptible fault is not provocation, is not violence. It is innocently to feign one's ignorance.

Actually, I do understand her, I always have. Her extreme behavior, her emptiness, her yearning and pain... I know what it's all about, only I dare not admit it.

I dare not admit that ages ago I got out of sync with this world's orbit and slipped out of it. I use her passionate rebellion as the last line of defense for my sorcery: as long as she's there, I've got an excuse to point out her cruelty with my quavering, righteous accusations, and to mock her stubborn opposition to the system with my deceitfully cynical tone. As I claim not to understand her, I actually feel sly relief. That's right, as long as she's there, the flames and hand grenades of the outside world can never reach me. What they persist in hunting is a rebel who dares to rip herself apart and devotedly savors extremity.

And I've known this rebel a long time. Twenty-four years ago she

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grew out of the dark, moist interior of my body, like a blue rose that oughtn't to exist in reality, springing forth from the depths of my blood and flesh—and I knew then her life's design.

Of course I did, I couldn't not understand her. Didn't I raise her to be this way?

I flee hastily from my dream, I'm so tired. After sleeping so long I'm somehow even more knocked out than after going at it so hard that time with Nine-Inch Nail.

Between my thighs is all slippery and wet, and the sweet smell of blood overflows from my dreams and won't disperse. I pull the sheet aside to see threads of thick menstrual blood oozing out from my black underpants, congealing between my thighs, licking their way all over my lower body in a bloodless coup. A few of the congealed blood clots are a tender black. I pick up a little piece and put it in my mouth, and taste a saltiness more pornographic than tears.

Looking at that surreal, gory, red painting, I feel like laughing. I guess it's hunger.

You've admitted to me that you can't appreciate many of my "tastes." I heard the shock and jumpiness in your voice; you thought I went too far. You couldn't understand—what was it I wanted?

I just laughed artfully and lifted your disheveled tresses to whisper in your so-sensitive ear.

—In that case, don't you appreciate me, Shelly?

—Silly child! I love you to death. I'm even afraid I might love you too much and you won't be able to bear it.

So you still don't understand why I hate this world with such savage ferocity? Why I fight it so resolutely?

I can't explain it, it's like an irresistible desire. If I'm to get any joy out of life, anything beautiful, then I can't allow myself to be humiliated, I can't allow myself to compromise. Even more, I want to see this earth dance wildly along with me so that all systems, all royal courts collapse and crumble.

How, when I am loving you, loving you with all my flesh and heart, could I let this world tell me that my ideology is an insect that

must not see the light; that if the great patriarcho-fraternal power structure tacitly permits my existence, that's benevolence enough!

I know you just don't understand. Why must I take any notice of all this? Don't we live very nicely? What do I want to fight against? What do I want to break?

It's very nice, but it's not enough, it could never be enough. If I can confess truthfully, what this makes me think of is the time when my friend K donated blood. The specially manufactured thick needle shook a few times in midair, then stabbed precisely into the blue vein jumping under her thin skin. The next moment her blood was flowing slowly into the translucent blood bag like a liquid creature driven from its land.

—Why do you want to give blood? Can a demon seek redemption?

I asked her this with a hint of mockery. K dearly loved to don her black leather jacket and go pillaging. When she picked up little girls in a T bar,⁵ she loved to plunder their tender necks, affecting the attitude of a demon lover and asking, "Would you offer me a little blood?" Such a wild kid wanted me to go with her to donate blood!

She looked at me weirdly a moment, half-smiling, a picture of self-satisfaction. What a show-off, she insisted on giving the full 500ccs. Right now she looked great, even her lips were white.

—The truth is that the vampire's greatest pleasure may not be in getting blood from its prey, but in passing the demon's blood it receives—welcomed by darkness—out into the world, to reproduce its own lovers.

I guess you don't want to know, Shelly, that every drop of blood that's ever flowed from your body was part of the yet-to-be-formed me! I've always wanted to get back those selves, and to find the "her" that you're unwilling to reveal—to truly accept me, to share with me pain and pleasure, instead of using the shackles of the normal world as the collar for an authorized pet, insisting on taming me.

Just like that, I understand.

I've always fought it, always worn the masks of lament and right-

eousness. Even when the last little wisp of love has followed vague memory's whirlpool into the turning wheel of "the past," I'm still playing the part of the dried-up swamp.

Actually, I don't love Sandy anymore. Or "the I that loves her" has died along with her. What I love is that child, viler and more bewitching than she. Although she comes from part of her, she's neither her nor me. . . .

But before I dared admit this, Aquaria was my excuse. I used to think tragically to myself: For the good of this child, this solitary child who can't fit in with human society; she can't get along without me, so I'll go on like this for her.

Ridiculous! Who is it that really can't get along without the other?

I don't only need her, I love her—as a mother loves her daughter, and with the incomparable yearning of a lover for a lover.

The music on the headphones has finished playing. I want to keep listening and walk into her study to get some more CDs. Suddenly, a cassette tape she's put on top of the cabinet throws my throat into a spasm.

I put the collection, recorded long ago, into the cassette slot and press the button. Like the sprightly goblins that flew out when Pandora opened the box, the familiar notes flow inside me.

It's the prelude from *La Traviata*. I begin to sing: "*Beloved, I will love you unto death . . .*"

Now it's just after three in the morning. I step carefully over Nine-Inch Nail's sleeping body, not wanting to disturb her.

Her luxuriant red hair spreads comfortably out over the blue pillow. Tiptoeing, I put on my shirt, jeans, and jacket, and pick up my backpack. Just as I'm leaving a note for her, her hand grabs me.

"Sorry to wake you."

A ray of blood-red still sparkles deep in her eyes: "It's okay, I'm not used to sleeping at night anyway."

"Then—"

Her hand stretches deviously toward my neck and continues exploring downward. When she feels I'm not wearing a bra, her

expression turns hazy, a look that says she'd like to go to bed with me again.

"I really don't want to let you leave."

I find her words most agreeable—exactly the right words for a farewell.

"Perhaps I'll come again."

A mischievous dimple appears on the left side of her face.

"Anytime you want to get lost, come to 'The Labyrinth' and find me!"

I continue as if by unspoken accord: "And you can lead me to the road to the womb."

I turn off the sound on the phone and remove the headphones.

It seems many days since I've slept. Every cell in my body yearns for rest; bubbles of dizzy sleepiness pour forth in a constant stream from my body and my veins.

I walk into my room and throw myself toward the bed, like a dehydrated fish thrown back into the lake.

Before I can think anything, I'm asleep.

This is the final confession: I am a journeyer searching for a journey.

Actually, I found you ages ago—my poem, my key word. I carry "her" continually, and continually bury "her." In the end, I want to bring "her" back to your side.

I want to go home. I've appeared repeatedly in your dreams. Now when you open your eyes, you'll see my exhausted body. Falling toward you.

Mama dear, please listen carefully for my returning footsteps.

The final scene in the dream is a red new moon. She hangs on the side of the sickle shape. I call out in fright, but her mouth shows a crafty, stealthy smile, the smile of someone proud of her own evil tricks. A

POEM FROM THE GLASS WOMB

considerable-sized hole breaks her belly open, a hole transparent like crystal, with no blood flowing from it.

I know. It's a dream and it's also an allegory of reality.

I can't utter a sound, my throat is full of mercury.

Inside her body it is totally empty, no internal organs and no roses, only . . . words, that I can't help reading but can't get inside. They're all poems she wrote, I know every one, and they make me want even more to hold her tight and tell her I'm by her side, I understand.

My child takes a glass bottle out of her body. In the bottle wavers a transparent blue-black liquid: warm, crystal-clear, dreamed amniotic fluid. It's a swamp, a swamp that never dries up.

Smiling, she puts the glass bottle into my belly.

Suddenly, I can speak. I call her, "Aqua—"

Then I awake, smiling.

Shelly, I want to come home.

I can't wait to tell you—I've found it! My story, my poem. It turns out it's a homeland we both share.

It's a swamp, a swamp that our whole world is immersed in. Only you can make me so wet; there I can cry my heart out. In the swamp in the glass water bottle, we'll be able to enter that world, the world I want.

As for my key word, no matter where I am, it's always with me. It's my homeland, and it's something that you will never lose. . . .

I think she's coming back.

She is my child, my lover.

Bringing my womb, my voice, and the poem she wrote on the way, she will return to my side.

NOTES

1. *Tongzhi* means literally “comrade,” but has been used since the early 1990s to denote the new lesbian and gay culture and politics. See introduction to this volume (p. 9–10) for further discussion of this term.

2. Tienmu is an exclusive, affluent residential suburb in the north of Taipei city. *Trans*.

3. This is a thinly-veiled reference to the 1990s journal of radical cultural criticism, politics, and philosophy, *Isle Margin*, to which Hong Ling herself was an occasional contributor. *Trans*.

4. A “leap month” is an extra month inserted occasionally to make the traditional lunar calendar accord with the solar calendar. *Trans*.

5. “T bar” is a Taiwan term for a lesbian bar, so-called because of the “Ts” (tomboys or butch lesbians) who frequent these bars. *Trans*.

A STRANGER'S ID



CHI TAWEI

Chi Tawei (b. 1972) was one of the most prominent figures on Taipei's young queer literary and cultural scene in the 1990s. A graduate of National Taiwan University, he is currently enrolled in the Ph.D. program in comparative literature at UCLA. In addition to being a prolific and critically acclaimed author in Taipei, Chi was a regular contributor to discussions about sexuality and cyberculture, particularly through his columns in Taiwan's major newspapers and magazines. In 1995 his novella *The Membranes* won the *United Daily News* Novella Prize. He has also published three collections of stories, a collection of essays, and Chinese translations of Manuel Puig and Italo Calvino, and has edited two books of local queer fiction and criticism. His writing styles are diverse, ranging from fantasy and science fiction to politically engaged vignettes about queer life in contemporary Taiwan, and his literary and critical output, ever popular with scholarly *tongzhi* readerships, played a key role in defining the direction of Taiwan's new wave of *tongzhi* intellectual and literary culture.

This short story is from his 1998 collection, *Fetish: The Stories*. It is the only story in this anthology to deal centrally with the subject of HIV/AIDS, and it is informed by Chi's characteristically uncompromising political stance on the persecution of sexual and gender nonconformity by the state of the Republic of China, as embodied, in this case, by the Taipei City Police Department. This powerful narrative, packed into just a few pages, offers us an insight into the life of a young gay boy of the generation that the older narrator of Chu T'ien-wen's story (this volume) finds so puzzlingly different from his own.



It was the tail end of summer, the height of the blaze. Unable to meet up with his buddy that evening, the junior police officer ate alone, beef and onion noodles in a styrofoam bowl. In his haste he bit his own lip, *what a fucking drag*, and the red soup scalded the split. It hurt, but he lacked the energy to care. He hadn't even shaved today.

One A.M., the border of Taipei City and Yungho, Taipei County: the deserted Yongfu Bridge on the Hsintien River.¹ This was the officer's favorite post, because once they were on the bridge, people were left no escape route: No one could get away. The junior officer wore an orange-and-white reflective vest, and against his chest the weight of a gun grounded his lightheadedness. In his hand he clutched a wanted notice with three mug shots. The faces of these men had been memorized long ago, along with their nicknames, their heights, and even their star signs (Capricorn, Virgo, and Taurus—he'd worked it out from their dates of birth).² But he didn't let go of the notice crushed almost to a pulp in his hand. It was on account of these three, and others like them, less famous but just as vicious and bloodthirsty, that the junior officer and his buddy were spending longer and longer on duty, more and more time standing around. This time, his buddy wasn't sharing his shift.

The summer night air was unsettled, the bridge's traffic scarce.

He waved down a scooter and ordered the driver to dismount, switch off the engine, remove the helmet, and produce identification.

The junior officer switched on his flashlight. The circle of light looked like a fun-park mirror, framing the other's shrunken form.

A chalk-white face, a silent head with yellow-brown hair to the shoulders, and behind the hair the faintly glimpsed gleam of an earring.

No ID.

Questions flashed through the junior officer's mind: Was this a man or a woman? Might they be on the wanted list? Were they Taiwanese, mainland Chinese (illegal immigrant?), Thai or Burmese (illegal laborer?). There were all types in Taipei County, the variables were too numerous, and this damn kid had no proof of identity.³

He addressed the human shape held immobile in the ring of light.

*"Lee shee chapu, chamu?"*⁴

"What?" The other was a little nervous.

"I said, are you a man or a woman?"

"A man."

"Haven't you ever heard Taiwanese? Are you from Taiwan? Are you a foreigner, then? Why is your hair that color?"

When the boy tried to explain, his voice was faint and trembling.

"I'm not a foreigner . . . I just dyed my hair today . . ."

I'm not a foreigner. I was born and raised in Yungbo, I've never in my life been overseas on vacation, and now I don't know if I'll ever get the chance. My hair's this color because of Foxy. I went to see Foxy today. He washes people's hair in a beauty salon. In the afternoon I went to his house looking for him, and he was home. It was him that dyed my hair. Foxy says, you just have to change the color of the hair on the outside of your skull, and you change the mood of the brain on the inside. The hair dye splashed onto my white T-shirt, and it looked like blood.

"Why don't you have identification?"

"I forgot it."

In fact, today I left the house without bringing anything at all, no money and no ID. When I left I couldn't think straight, my head was on the point of exploding. If I was about to lose my own head, how could I think to bring ID? But unless I left the house to get some air I'd have died in there.

"What's your name? How old are you?"

"My name is Li Ziqiang . . . nineteen . . ."

Actually, I'm only seventeen and nine months and of course I don't have a license, but better not tell the truth about that. I'm not about to give my real name to this guy; I gave Foxy's name. I don't know why, but every time someone asks me my name, I give Foxy's name, and it feels solid and safe. If I invent a name, I feel guilty; but if I give them Foxy's name, everything seems okay. Anyway he doesn't often use his real name, he prefers to be called "Foxy," to be cute, so why shouldn't I borrow his name?

Last week when I filled out the registration form for the blood test at the clinic in Chang'an West Road, my hands kept shaking, and I didn't write my real name, phone number, address, or ID card number:⁵ I'm not that stupid—if I really was infected, where would that leave me? I wrote Foxy's name, of course, but I just made up the rest of the information. I didn't want to get Foxy in trouble, I only wanted to borrow his name. White lilies gave off a dark, foresty scent in the dim surgery as the nurse sucked a tube of red-black blood from my arm. Her voice was carefully relaxed when she asked me my name and phone number. I felt my face fall, because I'd totally forgotten what I'd just written on the registration card, only remembering that I'd given Foxy's name. I had to invent a whole new set of personal details. The nurse's old face broke into a weird smile. She must have known I was lying. But she would have heard many lies there; what was one more?

"What were you doing in Taipei?"

The junior officer wanted to get a bit more out of "Li-Zi-qiang." "Li-Zi-qiang" hadn't said nearly enough. The junior officer hadn't found anything amiss in his accent as yet, but he still couldn't be sure he wasn't an illegal immigrant. He was waiting for the other to reveal his true colors.

"I went to Taipei to see my friend . . . to dye my hair."

If I hadn't gone to see Foxy today, I'd long ago have died and rotted away at home. A week after they take the blood, you can call the clinic to get the test result, positive or negative. Today is the sixth day, tomorrow I can call and get the result. In the days right after I'd given the blood, I felt normal, still as lively as ever. But on the fifth day, I started to have trouble sleeping, got stomach pains, and was shivering in the heat of the day. All right, I admit it: I'm scared

of dying. At the start I thought I didn't care what the result was, either way, but it turns out I care terribly. If I'd stayed at home all day today, who knows what stupid thing I might have done.

I made myself go and see Foxy, but I didn't dare tell him about the blood test or the release of the result tomorrow. But Foxy could see the worry written on my face, so he suggested dying my hair to make me feel better. His fingers rubbed back and forth on my scalp; now and then his chest pressed into my back. My head was bent low into the white ceramic hand-basin, and I watched the bright red bubbles of dye flowing down past my ears. It was as though Foxy was eating the red flesh of a watermelon over the basin. He took a towel and wrapped it around my head, sorry I've wrecked your T-shirt. I said it doesn't matter, but he still gave me his own T-shirt to change into.

When I took off my T-shirt, Foxy couldn't stop himself, and I didn't say no. His single bed wasn't large — lucky him and me are both so skinny.

Some people might think this is, think it's really strange. Aren't I afraid of dying? So why did I still do it? But, if I didn't do it, I'd only be more tormented; the frustration in my loins needed release. Afterward, we were so tired we dozed off and almost missed Foxy's evening shift. I rushed him to work on my scooter, and as soon as he went into the salon he was running busily back and forth, while I stayed there and watched. People's silhouettes moved here and there, the air was thick with strong perfumes. Amid the smell of the cosmetics I began to feel a sense of calm, and stopped being afraid. If the test result was okay, I could come here and be an apprentice hair-washer too, to give myself something to do, and to be near Foxy, so that I wouldn't think any more stupid thoughts. But, if the test result came back and it wasn't good. . . . Foxy finished his shift at midnight, and I asked him to come with me to buy sleeping pills. I said there's no way I'll sleep tonight, my eyes will stay wide open until dawn. Of course I didn't say, that's because I'm waiting to make the phone call on the morning of the seventh day. . . . Foxy turned red and asked me, is it because of what happened this afternoon? I'm sorry. I said, Foxy, I'm the one who should be saying sorry. . . .

"What are you going to Yungho for in the middle of the night?"

"I'm going home to sleep . . . I live in Yungho."

I want to go home and have a good sleep, and when it's morning, I want to call the clinic calmly and steadily, without shaking, and the old lady nurse will

ask my file number. I'll read out the figures, and then she'll tell me if I have it, or if I don't. Right now I want to go home and lie on my bed as still as a mummy, waiting for each hour to pass me by. I might not sleep at all, I might spend the whole night with my head in the toilet throwing up. Foxy patted my shoulder; you still feel bad, even after dyeing your hair? Do you want to stay at my place for the night? Or should I come to your place? I shook my head, even though I knew that it'd be better to have someone there to talk to. But if I wasn't careful, I might tell Foxy the secret about the blood test. I'll just wait and see—if I'm OK, I'll tell him then. Tonight I just want to go home by myself and sleep. . . .

The junior officer hadn't discovered any clues, and he was losing his patience.

"I ask you a question, and all you do is stammer and stutter, start and stop. Why don't you tell the truth? Why can't you talk clearly? I don't need this crap. How's this: You stay here and you wait. Later you come with me back to the station for a chat; leave your details, and then I'll let you go."

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong . . . I don't want to go to the police station . . . I want to go home . . ."

I want to go home and wait for tomorrow morning, then make the call. I don't want to wait alone at the police station till dawn. You'll find out about my blood test. You'll record it on my file. You'll know who I am.

"Li-Zi-qiang. I have no way of knowing if you are implicated in a case. I don't know whether what you've told me is true or false—why should I believe you? On top of that you have no ID. Maybe you're not called Li Ziqiang at all. Maybe you don't live in Yungho. Maybe you're not even Taiwanese. Maybe you're really a female transvestite. If I haven't seen any ID, how do you expect me to let you go?"

The boy gave in. The junior officer picked up his flashlight. Wordlessly, the boy stood to one side, deeply immersed in a feeling of guilt like formaldehyde, sinking him beyond salvation. The junior officer didn't take much notice of him as he prepared to wave down another vehicle. The more vehicles he stopped, the more details he took, the more names he noted, the better his record, then the less pointlessly

squandered seemed the hours of his youth spent on this bridge. The junior officer waved his hand, and a rider obediently stopped his scooter, removed his helmet, and produced identification.

Unexpectedly, the long-haired boy, who had been standing in detention off to one side, mounted the scooter. The key hadn't been taken out; it was still in the ignition. All he had to do was turn it and surge forward and he could shake off the policeman and get to Yungho. Hurriedly the boy started the scooter. All he had to do was be brave, risk forcing his way past, and everything would be fine.

Then, in the second before he was to make his escape, the junior officer's yell reached him, followed by a shot. The officer's reaction was lightning swift: It was as though he had long anticipated the boy's act of daring recklessness, and it took only one false move from the other to trigger his instant response.

"Don't run! Don't run!" His finger squeezed the trigger and a bullet lodged in the center of the boy's back. Together, scooter and boy fell to the ground, the boy's hair dropping like petals around him. A stream of blood sprayed up into the junior officer's face. The boy's blood leapt onto the junior officer's split lip, saturating the wound and seeping inside. The junior officer felt a sting and tasted salt but didn't reach up to wipe away the blood.

Just then a fierce glare flashed at the end of the bridge.

A scooter roared past in a fury of sound. The rider wore no helmet. In the dark his face seemed somehow familiar, but it was too late to stop him. For christ's sake. Surely it wasn't one of those three, the Capricorn, the Virgo, or the Taurus. . . .

The junior officer stood by the pool of the boy's blood, desperately hoping his eyes deceived him.

Don't ask me what part of his body I shot. I didn't see. And don't ask me who it was I shot. I'm not sure. Don't ask me who the guy was that I couldn't stop just now. I don't know any of it. All I know is that I'm exhausted; I'm only waiting to go back and face the solitude of a bowl of instant noodles. I'm only twenty-five, after all.

NOTES

1. Yungho is a satellite city economically dependent on Taipei City, and the Yongfu Bridge over the Hsintien River is one of the bridges separating middle-class, well-resourced Taipei City from the largely working-class municipality of Yungho and other satellite cities.

2. This refers to an actual incident in the mid-1990s in which three violent criminals remained at large for several months in the Taipei area after kidnapping, torturing, and finally murdering a well-known singer's teenage daughter. Police suspected the three were hiding out in Yungho, but they remained elusive despite a large-scale police hunt over several months. The incident caused the public humiliation of the Taipei City Police Department and led to an increase in police harassment around this time of anyone considered "suspicious," particularly in the vicinity of Yungho.

3. It's a fact well-known to residents of the economically underprivileged satellite cities of Taipei City, including Yungho, Chunggho, and Panchiao in Taipei County, that Taipei City police tend disproportionately to harass residents of those areas, since in the eyes of the city police the satellite cities have a reputation for harboring criminals and illegal laborers.

4. The police officer addresses the boy in Minnan language or "Taiwanese," while the boy speaks Mandarin. *Trans.*

5. The government-run venereal disease clinic in Chang'an West Road is notorious for the rudeness and homophobia of its staff.

ROSE IS THE PAST TENSE OF RISE



WU JIWEN

Wu Jiwen (b. 1955) is a well-established author, scriptwriter, and translator. In addition to the novel from which this story is excerpted, his other major work of fiction is the 1996 novel *Fin de Siècle Boylove Reader*, which rewrites the mid-nineteenth century Chinese homoerotic text *Precious Mirror for Ranking Flowers* in a modern context. Taiwan-based critic Jian Jia-shin lists Wu's *Boylove Reader*, along with Qiu Miaojin's *The Crocodile's Journal* and Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man*, as one of three "must-read" *tongzhi* novels of the 1990s.¹ The relationship between Wu's earlier novel and Chen Sen's *Precious Mirror for Ranking Flowers* has also been the subject of queer literary scholarship in Taiwan.² Wu has lived in Japan and has published Chinese translations of the novels of contemporary Japanese writer Banana Yoshimoto.

This self-contained narrative, excerpted from Wu's 1998 novel, *Galaxies in Ecstasies*, is the only piece in this anthology to address transgender issues. The novel unravels the complex histories of two generations of a family, spanning the period between the early 1950s and the 1990s. The novel sug-

gestively interleaves the story of the affectionate relationship between Sumi, a gay man seriously ill with an AIDS-related illness, and Seikei, his elderly transgendered aunt, with the account of Swedish geographer Sven Hedin's 1934 expedition to find the elusive "wandering lake" at Lop Nor in remote northwestern China. The chapter excerpted here relates Seikei's story of her gender transition as recounted to Sumi. As well as a moving account of one individual's gender transition, Wu's novel gives a fascinating fictional chronicle of Taiwan's cultural history during the 1950s and 1960s "white terror" period under the authoritarian KMT regime. This excerpt is particularly interesting for its exploration of the continuing influence of the Japanese colonizer culture on life in Taiwan during this period, as well as for its intimation of the hidden wealth of personal stories that haunt one family that lived through and was shaped by it. The unhurried pace and sometimes dreamlike atmosphere of this excerpt reflect elderly Auntie Seikei's storytelling as she relates these distant events to her nephew.



When Auntie started in about human helplessness that night at the aquarium, it turned out to be just the beginning.

Because Sumi's grandfather was adopted into Grandmother's family as a child son-in-law, their first son, born the second year of their marriage, had to take Grandmother's surname, and as a result, Grandfather was full of anticipation for the next son. Who could have predicted that when five or six months pregnant, Grandmother would be taken with a sudden, severe hemorrhage that all but cost her life, and lose the baby. The third child was a girl. The birth went smoothly but the infant was weak, and before long she perished from an infection. These two successive misfortunes caused Grandfather and Grandmother immense grief, but eventually they gathered their courage to attempt a fourth pregnancy. How could they ever have guessed it would be a pair of healthy twins—and both boys, which made Grandfather and Grandmother happy beyond their wildest hopes. The first delivered was "Auntie" Seikei and the other, named Seien, was Sumi's second uncle. After that the household was blessed with great fruitfulness: Grandmother gave birth to

six babies in succession, four girls and two boys, one of whom was Sumi's father.

Right from the time he was little, Seikei felt different from his brothers. Privately he grouped himself along with his young sisters, though he never said it out loud and wouldn't even have known how to say it. The idea was his deepest secret, but through his mannerisms and the way he wore his clothes he all but imperceptibly identified himself with his sisters and mother. The interesting thing was that the adults seemed to find this not the slightest bit strange. Perhaps unconsciously they thought that in any case with two such utterly inseparable children, one bookish and one boisterous or one girlish and one boyish made the perfect pair. Sometimes they even deliberately dressed Seikei as a girl when they went out, and people who didn't know would enviously tell them how lucky they were to have both a boy and a girl, and what's more, so healthy and pretty. Grandfather and Grandmother would thank them with great self-satisfaction, feeling enormous pride that was only heightened by the agony of losing the two earlier babies.

Before he started school, Seikei drifted quite carefree between genders, but once at school the objective reality that boys differed from girls caused him no end of trouble. He was naturally drawn to play with the girls, which provoked malicious taunts from the boys. But there was a positive side to it, too: Often a boy a few years older than he would take it upon himself to play his protector. What dismayed him most, though, was that thing that he had but the other girls lacked. He'd always found it intolerably ugly: He loathed it, yet was powerless to get rid of it. He remembered that his most frequent dream was one in which he discovered he'd been a girl all along, and that the extra part had just been put there by someone playing a cruel joke. He had only to put on a skirt or shout "girl!" and it would disappear without a trace.

But it never did disappear, and things got even worse when he went to Taichung for junior high. His school was a Catholic one with all-male teachers and pupils, and because of the distance, he had to board there. The bodies of those around him, as well as his own, were undergoing a time of intense change, as all of them to some

degree grew aware of the other bodies around them. It might be someone of the opposite sex they got pressed up against on a crowded bus, or a classmate they accidentally brushed past in the swimming pool in phys ed class. Such encounters left them with a slight hotness they'd never felt before and led sometimes to an insuppressible curiosity and reckless impulse.

By the middle of first term, boys began to appear unannounced by Seikei's bed after lights out, lifting his mosquito net to insinuate their way under his quilt. Seikei was nervous and a little scared at first, but dared not call out lest the dorm superintendent or his roommates find out what was going on. In the dark he could tell who the intruders were, most of them either boys who'd been kept down a year or boys from years above him, their bodies more fully developed than those of most juniors. Seikei felt not at all guilty that this kind of thing should be happening to him, nor was he disgusted by the intruders. But they often crushed him roughly and thrust their hands impatiently down into his crotch, or grabbed his hand and put it between their legs. Seikei was astonished by the thing he found there, so very different from his own, but the whole business brought him no enjoyment. His only pleasure came from his belief that at the height of the other's constrained frenzy, when he gave his heat and odor freely to Seikei, there was a wonderful, fleeting moment that might be called love. That brought Seikei a hazy kind of joy.

The school was founded and run by Catholic missionaries from Quebec. Its grounds were generous and its facilities modern; the instruction was exacting but never dull. At a time when most of Taiwan's students were studying away in dim, decrepit old classrooms, this school boasted a swimming pool with automatic chlorinator, a film theater, and a bright, spacious library that held the entire *Culture Constellation* series³ and the complete *Encyclopædia Britannica* as well as *Reader's Digest* and *National Geographic* magazines. Between the school buildings and the dorms lay broad lawns, all manner of exquisite gardens, and a whole array of sporting facilities.

At night after lights-out the campus became a different world. Many of the boys felt not the slightest bit sleepy and slipped out of the dorms with practiced moves to wander between shadows in the

darkened territory, engaging in nocturnal games of curiosity, violence, or debauchery, squandering their seemingly inexhaustible youth. Seikei, too, joined the ranks of the nocturnal adventurers.

When the dorm lights were out and the super's footsteps had receded into the distance, doors began to open and close. Some boys gathered in groups to climb the wall and go out looking for a fight—usually with the boys from Taichung Second State Middle School; some went out to chase girls or spy on them in their rooms at the nearby Catholic girls' school; not a few went off in search of a midnight snack to quell the hunger of their growing bodies. Seikei never joined in the activities that required escaping over the wall; his realm was the school's endless classrooms and corridors, the green oval reflecting the light of the moon, and the woods that whispered sweet nothings in the wind.

For a while, Hong from Lukang was his companion in these nocturnal escapades. Hong's real interest lay in dangerous sex, and his daring made for a timely enrichment of Seikei's nighttime adventures. He led Seikei over the cyclone wire fence into the gently undulating water of the swimming pool as it reflected the sky's dim light, daring him to slip into the water naked. Under water, visibility was low—they were like near-sightless fishes in the deep of the sea, finding the way through their world and sensing the assailant's ambush by the touch of skin and hair alone. Hong's favorite game was to swim with Seikei on his back, or to switch roles and ride on Seikei. Once he convinced Seikei to try kissing under water. They took a deep breath and went under together; at the bottom of the pool there was a sudden moment of utter silence. Hong took hold of Seikei's ears and gently placed his lips on his. When their mouths opened a stream of bubbles burst forth like another thousand immeasurably tender lips kissing the other's cheeks, nostrils, eyelashes, and hair. Perhaps the bubbles tickled—one of them started laughing and the other followed, and in the end they both swallowed water and choked half to death.

But Hong's risk-taking knew no bounds, and ultimately the swimming pool kiss was Seikei's one and only beautiful experience with him. Hong took him to a rank, mosquito-infested toilet block to read

a porn magazine by the dim glimmer of the lamp, then asked Seikei to help him to orgasm. Seikei found the whole thing very boring and only wanted to go back to the dorm. Another time Hong climbed in the window of the student counseling office and left Seikei to stand guard while he leisurely set about covering the desk of his most loathed disciplinary officer with drops of semen. Once at daybreak Seikei awoke with a start to find Hong bent over by his feet, rubbing his stomach with an icy-cold towel. Hong had drawn aside Seikei's quilt as he slept, pulled up his singlet and pulled down his underpants and must have then stood looking at Seikei's body while he played with that undisciplined little beast of his. Finally he'd ejaculated on Seikei's half-naked torso and used the damp towel Seikei hung drying on the closet to clean up the aftermath. The sky was bright; it was time for the wake-up bell to ring. Seikei was astonished at the blind force of Hong's desire: Looking at Hong's face he felt he was looking at a sex organ.

The boys who came to Seikei's bed at night, including Hong, didn't make contact with him at school during the day, though some caught his eye with an equivocal warmth in their glance. Seikei often heard them talking animatedly about girls with their classmates, and he knew some were exchanging letters with girls from other schools, while others had established girlfriends. They thought of Seikei as a short-term substitute, seeing him as female. That was all in accord with his own gender identification; by rights it ought to make him happy. On the contrary, though, it only compounded his misery.

In second year Seikei's own body began to change noticeably and he started to take an active interest in others. During Christmas vacation Seikei stayed at school as usual, while most students returned to their homes in other counties and cities. On the first day of the vacation he noticed Yang, a third-year student he liked, practicing basketball by himself. He joined in and the two of them had a great time, and even went for a cold shower together afterward. The weather was already cool and they yelled at the top of their lungs in the echoing bathroom. That night after lights out, Yang slipped quietly under Seikei's quilt. Maybe it was the cold weather: It was the first time the warm embrace of another made Seikei shiver uncontrollably. Yang

had a gentleness that was lacking in the others, and was seldom pushy; for Seikei, this was a completely new experience. Together they spent a happy vacation.

After the vacation everything returned to normal at school—except for Seikei. He thought constantly of Yang, and the moment class let out he'd go to Yang's homeroom to try to see him. When he found him, Seikei would approach excitedly and strike up a conversation, and the way he moved, spoke, and his whole demeanor at those moments were those of a girl. Every time Yang saw him his expression grew wooden and when he spoke to Seikei it was with indifference. Seikei was puzzled but tried this many times, each time with more or less the same result.

Before the end of term, Yang arranged a time to speak to Seikei after class in the Catholic cemetery behind the church. Orchid trees were planted there in rows and the landscape was beautifully kept, but few people ever went there. In a roundabout way, Yang stammeringly confessed to Seikei that he thought their relationship shouldn't continue, and that the affection Seikei showed him in front of his classmates made him uncomfortable. Yang said he'd always really liked Seikei, but their closeness over the Christmas vacation was just a passing phase. He'd thought of Seikei as an imagined girlfriend, but after all, Seikei was not a girl.

"And if I were?" Seikei asked Yang.

Yang took hold of Seikei's shoulders and said heatedly, "Wake up to yourself: You're a boy!" He added that whether he was in love with Seikei as a boy, or Seikei was convinced he was a girl, both were "abnormal" and would make them their classmates' laughingstock, to be treated like freaks. Very tenderly and with great concern he enjoined Seikei over and over again to "change his ways."

Their two shadows stretched out from the center of the twilight lawn, reaching beyond the grassed area to fall on the pure white rear wall of the church. Seikei remained silent and impassive most of the time, only giving an occasional dismal laugh, probably wearing the same expression of helpless calm she now wore as she told Sumi the story of these distant events. After that he and Yang maintained a prudent distance from each other at school. Before long Yang graduated and it

was said he'd got into Taichung First State Middle School. Perhaps because of all this, Seikei kept his heart tightly locked during his high school years and became a loner who associated hardly at all with his classmates. But he grew more and more convinced that the woman inside him was his real self. Bearing the burden of a fraudulent body for such a long time made his life endlessly painful, and having no one to talk to only redoubled the pain. He was still attracted to men, but wasn't overly affected by sexual desires. He yearned only for an intimacy that would bring him a sense of security; for someone to understand him and care kindly for him, and to share his secret. In those three years, his yearning was never satisfied.

When he moved to Taipei for college, he began actively to seek out any books he could find in the libraries that might help him unravel the mystery of his self. He soon discovered his first answers and found out about the practical steps that could be taken to change his situation. Mustering all his courage, he made the trip to National Taiwan University Hospital for diagnosis. There he learned that there were many who shared his problem. They were not, strictly speaking, ill—the most one could say was that they were the products of some joke by God, or maybe an accident. After a few consultations the doctor told him that his gender identification was extremely clear: The woman inside him was the real him. He told him that if he wanted to, he could start on female hormones to remove the external signs of his masculinity—his beard, the hair on his arms and legs, and his coarser skin and hair. When his body shape began to approximate that of a perfect woman—with the thickening of subcutaneous fat, the spreading of his chest and hips, the raising of the pitch of his voice, et cetera—then he could consider a sex-change operation to be recreated as his true self. “Although,” the doctor said, “it’s a long and difficult process, and there are no miracles.” Seikei had to accept one fact: No matter how effective the operation, he would never be exactly the same as a natural woman. After all, he could never bear children, and as soon as he stopped taking the drugs, his masculine characteristics would reassert themselves.

When Seikei heard this he was filled with hope for the future. But he still lacked the confidence to go through with the process because

he didn't know how he'd face all the people he knew afterward, particularly his family.

His family had been more or less aware of his peculiarity for a long time, but they didn't understand it, hoping against hope that once he'd done his military service everything would return to normal. He'd once taken his courage in both hands and told his mother of his true feelings. She'd only wept, because she was afraid; she thought it was some strange disease and worried about the tortuous path she thought her son must walk.

His mother's grief made the matter an open secret within the family. Seikei was keenly aware of the discomfort of his relatives and of their unconscious withdrawal from him. No one approached him to discuss the matter, although in secret he waited avidly, even hoping unrealistically for their care, forgiveness, and support. Of course there wasn't any of that. There was nothing at all aside from suspicious expressions and avoided looks.

Only for the sake of the family, he decided to put off the hormone treatment for the present: That was the one thing he could still do for them. He couldn't predict what kind of impact the post-treatment changes might have on them. He knew his patience would help him win the war; the moment was not yet ripe, and he could wait. Even so, his four years at university were much, much better than high school; he was far less bitter and conflicted. He transferred from commerce to biology and had several inevitably short-lived love affairs.

A cool east wind was blowing in our faces as we pushed off this morning, and we had to glide along in the shade of terraces from 6 to 9 feet high.⁴ Along the way all we saw were a few isolated, sickly poplars growing here and there.

We had cackling fowls and bleating sheep on board some of our boats, and the flotilla suggested a farm gone adrift. Amid the boatmen's song, sung in turns, we could see the Kuruk-tagh in faint outline, but distinctly.

It was nearly five when we landed at Tömenpu, a very interesting place on the right bank of the Konche-daria. There a terrace 12 feet high runs right along the edge of the bank; it presents a curious appearance because it has been excavated in four parallel passages which resemble yawning gateways. Below

this rampart a dam was built across the river four years ago at the orders of the amban, for it was just at this point that the Konche-daria, in 1921, left its old bed and opened a new way for itself along the dry bed of the Kum-daria.⁵

The vain idea was cherished that men's hands could conquer one of nature's caprices, and compel the Konche-daria to return to its old bed and, as before, water the fields around Tikenlik. The amban called up four hundred men from Charkblik, Tikenlik, Yangi-köl, Konche and Ullug-köl, and in the summer, when the river was at its lowest, 500 stout poplar stakes were driven into the bed of the river, forming two lines across the stream. The stakes in each line stood closely packed, but there was an interval between the lines, and the 400 workmen filled the gap as best they could with earth, reeds, roots, boughs and debris. They thought that if the project was completed the river would meet this imposing barrier and be compelled to turn away to the right and seek an outlet through the four passages which had been dug in the high bank—in short, return obediently to its bed of hundreds of thousands of years, and cease flowing into the old river bed that had been dry for two thousand years.

But all was in vain. The water trickled between the stakes and washed away the filling; and when the high water came in autumn, the whole dam was swept away and the massive stakes hurled on one side like so many match-sticks.

This was our last camp on the Konche-daria, and there we saw the last groves of living poplars. Next day we were to set off down the Kum-daria, the Sand River, the new river that human force could not turn back, to travel along with it through the barren desert.⁶

After graduation Seikei became secretary to a second lieutenant at a command center of the Yangmei division field forces. During military service his assignments often took him on bumpy bus journeys across the east coast area around Yangmei, Hukou, Fugang, Xinfu, and Hongmaogang, and training required bivouacking for days at a time deep in the seas of casuarina trees that fringed the sand. He'd drift between sleep and wakefulness amid the roar of the wind and the sound of the waves, and when he awoke his body would be covered by a layer of fine sand, dew, and casuarina needles. She said that for years after military service—even up to the present in which she told the story—she often dreamed of landscapes with windbreak

forests; desolate stretches of coast; limpid, silent rivers; blue-green ponds; cold, damp marshes lightly cloaked in mist; deserted concrete roads; electricity poles standing crookedly amid fields; skies with low layers of cloud. Each scene was painted over in tones of rust and exhaustion, like a portrait of her youth.

As an officer, Seikei was able to maintain at least some measure of personal space in the army, which was made up for the most part of men and generally lacking in individual privacy. He had a room of his own that served as both bedroom and office and was able to choose times when few people were about to take his shower in the unpartitioned bathroom, since he didn't quite dare to walk into a room full of naked bodies. Many of the middle-aged professional soldiers at the headquarters were very good to him, and of course he sensed their obviously suggestive intent. Almost every week one of them would give him a gift, ask him to a movie, or drive him out joyriding in a jeep. He didn't refuse, but neither would he openly agree to anything. At night he was aware of people moving around near his window and outside his door. There were times when they'd call on him for a chat after drinking, then say all kinds of wild things and stay in his room till very late, until they finally gave up and left. Once, on the only Chinese New Year's eve Seikei ever spent in the army, a quartermaster from Henan province who used to cut his hair embraced him, weeping, in front of everybody. Among the onlookers there wasn't a face that didn't show sadness.

When Seikei finished his military service, a teacher's introduction got him a research assistantship in a marine science lab in Tainan, and the following year he had the opportunity to do research in Okinawa. It was his first time outside Taiwan, and there was to be no second. While in Okinawa he applied for admission to the University of Kyoto, and when his research project wound up he headed north to pursue his studies in Japan's interior. His work didn't go well at Kyoto, and he realized he wasn't cut out to be a scholar. His straitened financial circumstances were one reason: In those days it was all but impossible to save enough money in Taiwan to study overseas, and having lost his family's support, Seikei had to provide for himself independently. At that time it was unusual to take a job to

finance study, so in the end his only real option was to drop out and get a job. He moved from place to place many times after that, but never again trod the soil of his homeland.

When the sun sank in blazing gold and deep scarlet, and the full splendor of the afterglow lay over that ancient wasteland, we lay to under a bank on which there was fuel in abundance, pitched our tent and lighted our camp-fires.

When we had finished our simple evening meal, put out our lights, and lain down in the tent, there was a moment of complete silence, as though to allow the night to rearrange its stage: the direction of the wind, the arrangement of the clouds, the height of the tide, the positions of the constellations.

In reality there is no true silence, just as we have never drunk a mouthful of tasteless water. Silence has its own voice, but it is difficult to detect. I now listened closely to the voice of silence.

I thought I heard people's voices in the night outside, and wondered what they were whispering about among the graves. I heard the splash of paddles on those old waterways, the sound of whose water must have gladdened the hearts of travelers after months of journeying through the dry, barren deserts. I heard the caravan bells drawing closer from afar, and the camels giving excited snorts as they scented the fertile grazing-grounds on the banks of the lakes. A crisp ringing of hoofbeats came from the fast horse of the courier (I had found a number of their letters and replies to them on my second visit to Lou-lan thirty-three years before), I heard the clattering of war chariots manned with archers and spearmen, the clash of their shields and swords, and the clang when the bows were drawn and the arrows sped on their way. And in the great city that existed like a mirage on the distant lake bank the ecstatic drumbeats of the ever-changing, variegated carnival of each season.

But there came a day when the life-giving river thought fit to change its course and pour its water into the southern part of the river to form another lake there. In this way it brought to completion another of its thousand-year games, like a practical joke, a game with all the innocence and cruelty of an unruly child.

While the eternal stars glittered over the graves, woods, lawns, avenues, gardens and ploughed fields dried up, withered and died; youth, love, the flourishing seasons were one by one forgotten as the background colors faded; the joyous

*shouts of the carnival were covered by the heavy sound of silence, death following on death.*⁷

While searching for work, Seikei was drawn to ads in the employment column seeking a “sister-boy” or a “Mr. Lady,” and without a moment’s hesitation he embarked on a completely new life trajectory.⁸

His first job was as a bar attendant in Osaka’s Nanba district. At that point he had yet to begin the hormone treatment and although he tried cross-dressing as a woman, it felt utterly wrong. His skin had no natural luster, and no matter how he tried he couldn’t shave clean the traces of his beard, so he was forced to cover everything under thick makeup. The whole thing made him most uncomfortable—he looked far too masculine for that type of bar. He dressed as a woman only when working; when he left he dressed in his customary androgynous style that leaned toward the masculine.

Right around that time a French performance group called The Blue Boys came to Japan on tour. With this the nation’s people, their basic daily needs satisfied and now learning to seek out excitement, discovered the peculiar attraction of the cross-dressing drag queen. The group created quite a stir in the big cities. The press trailed them and churned out reams of stories, which of course caught Seikei’s attention. Not only did he go to see the show, he went to their hotel and spoke to one of the Blue Boys with the aid of their Japanese agent.

This was the only completely transgendered Blue Boy, and in the course of their conversation Seikei was given a very special name card. It was special not because of the French and Arabic writing on it, but because the card he now held in his hand was that of a surgeon in Casablanca, Morocco, whose name was as full of mystery as if he had been a magician or an alchemist. This card, with its peculiar gilded letters and slightly wrinkled surface, was for Seikei like the key to the gate of heaven. And Casablanca was just as vague and distant as the kingdom in the sky. According to Carol—the performer who gave him the card—this doctor was a highly skilled surgeon,

but not at all backward in the matter of fees. Morocco wasn't like Europe and America or Japan; he could easily disregard all the strict regulations laid out by boards of medicine and sanitation regarding sex-change operations. All you had to do was fork out the exorbitant fee and on the spot he'd set in motion his bold ruse for God's imperfect creatures. His reputation rested on his high success rate.

Seikei worked hard for four years in the nightclubs of Osaka and Kobe but saved hardly anything. He was hindered by his inadequate femininity: His presence seemed only to throw into relief the enchanting mystery of his colleagues. As a result, his salary remained low and his tips pitifully few. On top of that he was almost thirty. If he had to wait till he was forty or even fifty before having his dream operation, he wasn't sure it would still be worthwhile.

Then a colleague's introduction gave him the chance to leave the Kansai area, where things had been so hopeless, and try out his last resort—the Kanto area, with its thriving populace and the international cities of Tokyo and Yokohama. He found his way to a high-class club called Snow White's in Tokyo's Kabuki-cho Ni-chome district and began work as a trainee.⁹ The proprietor of the club generously gave him an advance on his salary to begin the treatment. Although the hospital he attended was a private one, the doctor in charge of his case was very cautious. He insisted that he undergo a series of psychological consultations to ensure he wasn't acting under the influence of a temporary delusion or some other unnatural cause, such as the desire to sell his body or satisfy the perverted desires of a lover. One by one he passed all the tests and finally reported his intention formally to the Departments of Health and Residency.

He began a course of female hormone injections supplemented with an oral preparation. Patiently he waited. Although time had never been on his side, he knew that the moment he took decisive action, his destiny was effectively turned around. Regardless of what the final outcome might be, he could now face himself and the world with a laugh of satisfaction and thankfulness.

The changes in his body were seen rather than felt. His beard, like crops planted in poor soil, ultimately decreased to a sparse down,

while the hair on his head grew thicker. His skin appeared as though a layer of the finest oil had been applied by a dexterous and even hand both outside and in, becoming noticeably more elastic and delicate. He found the changes in his figure a little extreme—it was as though his whole frame was being molded afresh. The lines of his body became generally softer, his breasts began to protrude slightly and his nipples became more obvious; his hips in particular began to spread, so that each time he looked in the mirror he felt like shaking his head and laughing, even though really it was no laughing matter.

He began cross-dressing full time, studied up on the art of makeup application, and took great pains styling his hair and coordinating his accessories. He also gave free rein to those remaining aspects of his femininity that he'd unconsciously repressed. Now his walk and all his gestures took on quite a different savor, and he began to develop his own particular style.

He accustomed himself to wearing women's underwear and using the women's toilet, and to being stared at in public places and flirted with by many pairs of eyes. He got used to men politely letting him get into elevators first, and to being felt up by well-dressed middle-aged men on buses and the subway. Every other day someone's hands would take liberties with his breasts, buttocks, or thighs.

Often, regardless of where he was or what he was doing—walking in the street, sitting on a bus looking out the window at the face of some passerby, or waking from a dream—there would burst forth within him an indescribable rippling sensation, washing over his body like a series of wavelets one after another. Sometimes he felt like some ancient fish washed by the waves at last into a sea within a dormant volcano, his eyes witnessing daybreak over a new world. His unquiet body, too, welcomed the dawn of a new life.

By now he had completed his traineeship at Snow White's and had begun attending customers. His subtle air of enigmatic tenderness and the atmosphere of exoticism he exuded as a result of not being Japanese soon attracted a host of admirers. His income skyrocketed, but aside from basic expenses he deposited all of it into his bank account. Every inch of the road to Casablanca had to be paved with banknotes. It also became his ambition to learn French. His

teacher was a young woman from Lyons who had come to Japan to study Zen at Kamakura's Kenchoji Temple.

It was around this time that Seikei met Murou Inkichi, at the time the youngest member of the House of Representatives. He was twenty-eight, and represented Takamatsu province. Inkichi's grandfather, Ushinosukei, had been a renowned educator during the Meiji Restoration, working in particular toward women's education, and Inkichi's uncle—who had the same father but a different mother than Inkichi's father—was vice chair of the House of Representatives before the war. Inkichi's father had worked in finance and in the 1930s was employed in the Bank of Taiwan. It was then that Inkichi was born, in Taipei, capital of the Japanese empire's southern reaches. He lived there until he was eight, when he returned with his family to the empire's interior.

The first time he came to Snow White's, Inkichi was brought by associates from the House of Representatives, along with some executives from foreign trading companies. Seikei and Inkichi didn't speak, and Seikei retained only a vague impression of him after they were introduced, which he soon forgot. About a month and a half later Inkichi came back alone and asked specifically for Seikei, who by that time was known as Mina.

Inkichi had taken special notice of Seikei from the beginning because he knew he was Taiwanese. They were about the same age, and Inkichi felt as if he'd happened upon a playmate from his past. He talked and laughed eagerly with Seikei, even taking pains to sprinkle his conversation with the few phrases of Minnan that remained in his memory.¹⁰ But the Inkichi that Seikei saw was an old man with the face of a young one. The pressures of family, public opinion, and work meant he'd had to mature early, and his speech and laughter already betrayed the savor of frailty.

With meticulous care, Seikei described for him the picture of a childhood foreign even to himself. He let Inkichi fall enraptured into the fictive nostalgia, as if by doing so he could relieve the insupportable pressure of his public life, as well as his strange weariness. Inkichi did not fully understand the mystery of Seikei's body, but his mystery and uniqueness made him regard Seikei as a god. Yet this

god was not distant like most gods; rather, Seikei showed him the compassionate love of a mother. Inkichi fell in love with this maternal deity.

We followed a narrow channel which pointed almost straight to Lou-lan and which might have been dug by men. Tamarisks in clumps lined its banks: it was easy to believe that those desert bushes had been planted to give shade to canoeists of ancient times. But the channel stopped and turned into a good-sized lake, from whose bottom tamarisks and reeds stuck up, and islands of different sizes.

The sun shone burning hot, luckily there was a fresh northeasterly breeze, and we had a splendid following wind across the lake. The boats rolled, and the water grew turbid. The lake was mainly shallow; the greatest depth Chen found with the lead was 5 feet 10 inches.

We scraped along reed-beds which rustled at our touch, and sometimes tamarisks stretched their violet clusters of flowers over us. Over our heads gulls uttered their shrill warning cries; they had never before seen canoes on Lou-lan's sinuous waterways.

We reached the southern shore of this lake at 12.50 p.m. and sought in vain for a narrow cut leading toward Lou-lan. We therefore landed, and sent Babed-din south and Sadik southwest to spy out the land. The place where we landed then became camp no. 86, the final stage of our journey towards Lou-lan, at any rate for myself.

Although I would have liked to tread once again among the ancient ruined city of Lou-lan that thanks to the grace of God I had discovered thirty-four years before, on March 28 1900, I was not now in good enough training for a long march in the summer heat, and in any case the target of this expedition was Lop Nor. But Chen was eager to undertake the march, and I was glad to be able—thanks to his youthful energy—to link up with his and Hörner's map of 1951 and my own journeys in 1900 and 1901. He left at dusk.

After dark, the crescent moon shone bright and sharp over the desert. After Chia Kuei and Ali had gone to bed I sat up for a long time writing in the pleasant night coolness. A wonderful silence reigned; only the cry of a night bird was heard from time to time.

Our expedition was now broken up into seven different sections. Yew, Kung

and Effe were on their way to Tun-hwang; Jomcha, Erashin and a couple of boys were at camp no. 70; Dr. Hummel was at work on the upper Kum-daria; Bergman round the riverside lakes south of camp no. 70; Garagin and three boatmen were at camp no. 80; Chen was walking to Lou-lan, Sadik, Rozi and Babeddin accompanied Chen at their own request, and I was at camp no. 86.

Each of the independent expedition groups must rely on their own capabilities to rejoin the group. Footprints left only faint marks on the hard sedimentary clay, and looking about one the desert scenery all seemed the same. If they lost the track, no one would be able to find them and carry water and grain to them to save them. The thought of one day after another passing, till at last we had to start without them . . . made me shudder.

I didn't know when all of us could gather together again, all safe and free from harm.

I flung this question out to myself, to the God of the heavens who looks eternally down upon us, and to the earth over which we passed.¹¹

By his third year at Snow White's, not even the most sharp-eyed could mistake his gender. To acquaintances and strangers alike, he was a complete woman. He himself was only occasionally aware of his body's single remaining regret, but far from decreasing his desire to be rid of it, this only intensified his resolve. That fall Inkichi was invited to France on a tour of inspection of the shipbuilding and auto manufacturing industries, and Seikei decided to go along. The doctor in charge of his case gave him permission to have the operation but was more hesitant about his going to Morocco. He seemed to think the whole thing would be as perilous as dissection at the hands of some savage African witch doctor. But although Morocco was not Seikei's only option, it was the quickest. And now he had enough savings.

Before they left, Inkichi organized two passports for Seikei: One was the male Seikei's passport, while in the other one, both his photograph and gender were female.

In France, Seikei didn't join in Inkichi's work tour, but in between Inkichi's obligations they spent many happy hours together, walking in the streets of Paris and Marseilles, going to the theater, visiting vineyards in Provence, and sampling the new wine, gourmet cheese,

smoked sausage, and local cuisine. They also enjoyed the hospitality of an old friend of Inkichi's father, staying for two days in his ancient castle near Vichy. There they enacted the story of the film they knew so well, speaking the lines faithfully, and like hero and heroine they experienced the ecstasy of love and the misery of death, the emptiness of fleeting life. All this, Seikei thought, would become their own Marienbad.¹²

Then Seikei set out on the unknown road to Morocco. It was a journey on which no one could accompany him.

When I awoke in the morning the cup of tea which stood by my pillow had a fresh, cooling effect, but soon the stifling heat came on.

I made Chia Kuei tie up all the edges on the tent so that the draught could blow right through. The climate on the lake was quite different from that on the river; there we never had to complain of the heat.

I shortened the hours of waiting by drawing and painting the curious landscape which surrounded us. At 7.30 p.m. Chia Kuei and Ali lit a big bonfire on the top of a yardang and kept a steady lookout to south and southwest.¹³ They shouted, but no one answered. As soon as it had grown really dark, after 8 p.m., the bonfire was lighted and spread its orange light over the country round. The yardang ridges raised their yellow backs out of the surrounding darkness.

When Ali begged me to let him go and find the four missing men before dawn, I hesitated to let him go. A silence like that of the night prevailed when I woke the next morning. Ali had gone.¹⁴

Seikei arrived in Casablanca with a feeling of chill. But the white streets, the clamorous markets, the Moorish women in their long robes, the cries from minarets calling people to prayer at the fixed hour, and the scorching wind that now and then blew in from the desert, bringing with it what Seikei suspected was the odor of camel dung, all reminded him that this was a continent called Africa.

The hospital was in the new part of the city, and not hard to find. It was a bright, sparkling, modern building, not the house he'd envisioned with thick walls of whitewashed clay, carved window lattices,

and dark winding corridors. The surgeon was an Arab, whose age it was typically impossible to tell. He wore a full beard and his speaking voice was very soft, but he wasn't good with words and stammered a little. It seemed to Seikei that he was the one who ought to be nervous, but at least the surgeon's manner helped him maintain his own calm. The surgeon glanced quickly over Seikei's medical records, verbally confirming a few points regarding his recent health. He didn't ask a bunch of questions like "Are you sure this is what you want," "Aren't you afraid you'll regret it," and "Do you know what you're doing." Nor did he request that Seikei "think it over again carefully" or anything similar. Finally he reiterated to Seikei what he was allowed to eat and drink prior to the operation and confirmed the appointment for two days later at 9:30 A.M.

Seikei went into the adjoining room to complete the registration procedure and hand over the fee. There he was greeted by a woman whom he saw at a glance must be the surgeon's wife. She wasn't an Arab lady with her face covered by a veil, hardly daring to speak; she spoke clearly and articulately and did her job with a detachment that betrayed a certain sharpness. She had short red hair and white skin, and her slightly plump figure was attired in a fashionable European suit. After he'd settled the fee, she said with a smile that ideally, he should stay at the hospital the following night. As he was leaving she took his hand and said a word of blessing in Arabic that meant something like "your dream will come true." Seikei laughed.

The next day Seikei awakened very early, some time before dawn. He found he was too excited to sleep. This was the last day he would be male—even if only one percent male. He opened the French doors to the balcony and found a light rain falling outside. It was almost impossible to see the traffic passing on the road; the sparse streetlights seemed tired out and dim after a long night of shining.

The rain ceased at dawn and the moisture in the air soon dissipated. The scene before him was now sharply outlined in sunlight, its colors full and solid, unlike the day before when the whole city had seemed covered in a layer of yellow-brown and lacking in any sense of depth.

He walked around the city for nearly the whole day, impatient for

the arrival of tomorrow. Before leaving the hostel he asked a bright, honest-looking boy outside, who obviously wanted to be his guide, to take his luggage to the hospital. Then he began wandering among old Medina's uneven, unplanned alleys and lanes, built by the Arabs in ancient times. He became so lost that he kept ending up back at the same spot, unable to find the way out, yet he felt only fascination, not panic. He passed under the gaze of many curious eyes, among them not a gaze that was not profound and beautiful. His ears were filled with strange voices, especially the peculiarly proud tone of some of the women, which it made him glad to hear. And the air was full of every kind of scent: bread baking in clay ovens, cabinets filled with spices and herbs whose names he didn't know, flowers on windowsills, compost in sheepfolds, strong, mint-scented tea, roasting coffee, steam from the Moorish baths, tobacco in gurgling hookahs, freshly washed clothes drying in the sun—he couldn't stop greedily breathing it all in. Only when he passed by the tannery and dye factory was he forced to do as the locals did and stuff his nostrils with crushed mint leaves to avoid being choked by the indescribable stench.

He followed a little road planted with rows of date palms and olives to a hill on the outskirts of the town and lay down under a large fig tree for a midday nap. After waking, he walked to a windy cemetery facing the sea and sat staring into the deep blue of the nearby Atlantic Ocean, humming a song with no tune. He hadn't eaten the whole day and had no particular desire to do so. It wasn't until three or four o'clock, when thick clouds drifted over the sun and the temperature suddenly dropped, that he sensed something amiss in his stomach. At that moment two shepherds were crossing the road with a great flock of sheep, and Seikei asked them for something to eat. One of the youths brought from his robe some yogurt mixed with alcohol and poured a cup for Seikei to drink. Soon his whole body felt warm, and he made his way back toward the city, where the lamps were now gradually coming alight. Before going to the hospital he made a special detour to the poor district to give alms in the square in front of a local mosque.

The next day he was taken punctually into the operating theater

at the agreed hour. While the general anesthetic was being administered, the surgeon's wife stood beside him holding his hand, a beneficent smile on her face. After what seemed just a moment, Seikei opened her eyes to find she was now back in the ward. A young black nurse told her the operation had taken almost nine hours; she had left the theater at six P.M., and it was now after eight.

Perhaps because the anesthetic had not yet worn off in the lower part of her body, she felt no pain at all but was unable to move. It was as though part of her had ossified into rock, rigid and heavy. But her mood was bright despite the fact she was too exhausted even to smile. That night she slept fitfully and had many dreams.

In one dream she was floating faceup in a lake surrounded by snowy mountains, while all kinds of gigantic, nameless water creatures swam around her. She took little notice of them, knowing clearly that they could do her no harm, but beneath the water she felt something insistently snatching at her lower body with its claws or teeth.

She also dreamed of a woman ceaselessly crying, surrounded on all sides by curious passersby. At first she didn't know what made the woman cry so brokenheartedly, but finally she understood: The woman's body had grown a male sex organ — she even drew aside her skirt and displayed it for everyone to see. Seikei desperately wanted to come forward and tell the weeping lady that all she had to do was register at the police station and everything would be all right, but she didn't dare, because she was afraid that everyone would recognize her as the person who had been crying on the street the last time.

Halfway through the night her groin was assailed by intense pains as she slept, and she felt a slight desire to urinate. When the nurse came to help her, she realized that a small tube had been temporarily inserted there, and her happiness turned suddenly to rapture.

On the fifth day after the operation, Seikei began to get up and move around. Three weeks later when she was discharged, she was able to move about freely, as long as it was only for a short time. She stayed for another week at the youth hostel near Casablanca harbor. That week it was rainy, and she was like a newborn infant looking

curiously at this wet world on the margin of the arid, as if she had never before been in this city.

One day just after dusk she lost her way again in Medina. She wandered this way and that, and without knowing quite how, she ended up in someone's yard—apparently a rear yard, with a well. The dim light spilling out from the house shone on the naked body of a man washing himself amid splashing water. The pitch black of his skin was a shiny coat of wetness, making his body glimmer and shine like a freshly cast copper statue. Although he was thin and tall, with long, slender arms and legs, he had the prominent muscles of a laborer, which lent the lines of his back, waist, and shoulders a strong attractive power. Watching in shock from the darkness, Seikei felt a sudden tightening between her legs. Her first thought was that it was an erection, but she immediately laughed at herself. Now she knew the reason the surgeon's reputation had spread so widely. She realized that the part of her that had been transformed so completely had maintained the sensitivity proper to it; provided she was willing, it would continue to bring her pleasure.

After returning to Japan she faltered several times, but finally told the "glad tidings" to her relatives back home and sent a recent photo. Needless to say, the news came to them as a bolt from the blue. As though by unspoken accord, it immediately became the family's greatest secret and taboo.

At 11 a.m. I went up onto a high yardang again to have a look through my glasses. I had hardly got to the top when I saw a man dragging himself wearily toward the camp. At first I thought it was Ali, but there came two more, and then another man alone. I realized it was Chen and his three companions. To me it was like waking from a nightmare to have them back safe and sound.

I proposed to the marchers, who seemed too weary even to speak, that they should have a good breakfast and sleep as long as they liked. But Chen was so full of what he had seen that he wanted to tell me about it all first. Then I made him lie down and rest, and he slept like a child.

It had been farther to Lou-lan than we had calculated—11 miles, not 7½.

They had reached Lou-lan at 2.15 p.m. on the second day after setting out, and stayed there two hours. Chen climbed up on to the tower, where the flagstaff which Hörner and he had planted on the summit still stood upright. At the foot of the flagstaff lay the tin case in which three years before they had placed two papers, one describing Dr. Erik Norin's explorations right up to this region in 1928–50 and their own investigations in the winter of 1930–51, and the other bearing words in English complimentary to myself, honoring me as the discoverer of Lou-lan. Chen now added to these two new papers, one of which recorded our journey to Lop-nor; the other was a poem singing the praises of Lou-lan.

The weary marchers slept deeply nearly all day. It began to grow dark, and nothing was heard of Ali. We lighted a huge bonfire, and I had just given orders to Sadik, Babeddin and Rozi to follow the missing man's tracks next morning and find him, when I heard the cry, "Ali keldi" (Ali's come!); and quite true, he came staggering to my tent, half-dead, and quite incoherent.

So this anxiety too was removed, and next morning we would leave that dangerous shore and restore Lou-lan to its majestic solitude.¹⁵

NOTES

1. Jian Jia-shin, "Shuxiexhongde xianshen zhengzhi" (The politics of coming out in writing), *Unitas* 148 (February 1997): 67.

2. Chang Chi-wei, "Chuan Yue 'jingxiang wushi': yuedu Pinhua baojian yu Shibimo shaonian'ai duben" (Triple meconnaissance in the queer mirror of male love: Between P'in-hua pao-chien and Shib-chi-mo-shao-nien'ai tu-pen"), *Chung-wai Literary Monthly* 303 (August 1997): 68–101.

3. The *Culture Constellation* series (*Wen xing cong kan*) was Taiwan's best known, most respected cultural publication of the 1960s. *Trans.*

4. This and subsequent excerpts from Sven Hedin's narrative are taken largely from Hedin's 1937 text *The Wandering Lake*, translated from the Swedish by F.H. Lyon (London: Routledge and Sons, 1940). The book was published in Taiwan in Xu Yunshu's Chinese translation in 1955, and Wu Jiwen explains in an afternote to *Galaxies in Ecstasies* that Sumi—Seikei's nephew—once read Xu's translation and was deeply impressed by it. The excerpts have been marginally altered, rearranged, or added to in some places by the author (see subsequent notes). *Trans.*

5. An *amban* is a minister or official; the word is of Manchu origin. *Trans.*

6. Hedin, 36–38, 39–40. Wu has selected and run together particular pas-

sages from Hedin's text and made some minor alterations to heighten dramatic effect. *Trans.*

7. Hedin, 121–122. Wu has drawn loosely from Hedin's text, reordering and rewording some parts. The sentence beginning "In this way it brought..." and the last lines, beginning with "youth, love...", are Wu's additions. *Trans.*

8. These are terms that refer to transgendered men working in Japan's entertainment industry. *Trans.*

9. Tokyo's Kabuki-cho area is one of the city's oldest red-light districts; Nishichome is today a center for Tokyo's lesbian and gay subcultures. *Trans.*

10. Minnan is a variant of Hokkien language commonly spoken in Taiwan, sometimes referred to as Taiwanese. *Trans.*

11. Hedin, 123–127. Wu has drawn loosely and selectively from the text. Wu added the final sentence to increase the sense of ominous foreboding. *Trans.*

12. This refers to Alain Resnais' film *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* (1961), in which one character, X, tries to convince a woman, A, of a possibly fictitious past in which they had an affair and she agreed to leave her current lover to be with him. As well as Seikei's association of his and Inkichi's holiday with the film's location, there is an obvious link between Seikei's situation and the film's meditation on reinventing the past. *Trans.*

13. A *yardang* is a ridge formed by wind erosion; the word is of Turkish origin. *Trans.*

14. Hedin, 125–127. Wu has slightly altered Hedin's text for dramatic effect. *Trans.*

15. Hedin, 127–130. Wu has drawn selectively from these passages. *Trans.*

CHINESE TITLES

朱天文〈肉身菩薩〉

1990年，朱天文，〈世紀末的華麗〉

台北：遠流

邱妙津〈柏拉圖之髮〉

1991年，邱妙津，〈鬼的狂歡〉

台北：聯合文學

朱天心〈春風蝴蝶之事〉

1992年，朱天心，〈想我眷村的兄弟們〉

台北：麥田

許佑生〈岸邊石〉

1992年，許佑生，〈懸賞浪漫〉

台北：遠流

林裕翼〈粉紅色羊蹄甲樹上的少年〉

1992年，林裕翼，〈我愛張愛玲〉

台北：聯合文學

林俊穎〈是誰在唱歌？〉

1994年，林俊穎，〈是誰在唱歌？〉

台北：麥田

陳雪〈尋找天使遺失的翅膀〉

1995年，陳雪，〈惡女書〉

台北：皇冠

洪凌〈玻璃子宮的詩〉

1996年，盧劍雄編，〈他他她她的故事〉

香港：華生

紀大偉〈一個陌生人的身份證明〉

1998年，紀大偉，〈戀物癖〉

台北：時報文化

吳繼文〈玫瑰是復活的過去式〉

1998年，吳繼文，〈天河撩亂〉

台北：時報文化

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Fran Martin spent a year and a half in Taipei in the mid-1990s researching Taiwanese queer fiction and culture. She is the author of *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film, and Public Culture* (Hong Kong University Press, forthcoming 2003) and has published articles on Taiwan's queer politics, literature, and film in journals including *Positions*, *GLQ*, *Intersections*, *Critical InQueeries*, *Communal/Plural*, and *Chung-wai Literary Monthly*. She is coeditor with Chris Berry and Audrey Yue of *Mobile Cultures: New Media and Queer Asia* (Duke University Press, forthcoming 2003) and editor of *Interpreting Everyday Culture* (Arnold, forthcoming 2003). Her current research investigates lesbian representation in the transnational Chinese popular cultures that span Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China. Fran Martin is presently lecturer in Cinema Studies at La Trobe University, Australia.